



h o m i l y
guides

GIFTED TO GIVE
ADVENT-CHRISTMAS 2020

HOMILY GUIDE 2020

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FOREWORD

ADVENT - CHRISTMAS 2020

HOMILY GUIDES

The year 2021 marks the quincentennial anniversary of the first Mass in Limasawa on March 31, 1521. It was Easter Sunday. Father Pedro Valderrama, OSA, the lone priest of the Magellan-Elcano expedition celebrated the Mass. Two weeks later, he administered the sacrament of baptism to 800 Cebuans along with their rulers, Raja Humabon and his wife, Hara Humamay. As baptismal gifts, Magellan gave them an Ecce Homo, an image of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the Sto. Nino.

Thus began the sowing of the seeds of Catholic Faith in the Philippines. That seed grew to a sturdy, fruit-bearing tree five centuries later and became one of the only two countries in Asia that is predominantly Catholic, along with Timor-Leste. Being such, the Philippines plays a crucial role in sharing the gift of faith to other countries.

In order to effectively share that gift, especially to our brothers and sisters in Asia, the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines embarked on a nine-year journey to 2021. Each year is marked by the nine pastoral priorities of the Philippine Church, leading ultimately to the Jubilee theme: “Gifted to Give”.

Here then is a gift that the Episcopal Commission on Catechesis and Catholic Education (ECCCE) and the San Carlos Seminary Graduate School of Theology (SCS-GST) give to the Catholic Church in the Philippines: a compilation of homily guides for the Sundays of the Advent Season, Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, Aguinaldo Masses, Christmas Masses, the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, and the Feasts & Solemnities on the Sundays within Christmas season.

May these guides help our spiritual shepherds to inspire the Catholic faithful to give to others the gift with which they have been blessed 500 years ago: the light of Christ.

Given on the 29th day of November, First Sunday of Advent, in the year of our Lord 2020.


REV. FR. NOLAN A. QUE, PhD
ECCE/CEAP – NCR/RCAMES

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

NOVEMBER 29, 2020



“Be watchful! Be alert!”

READINGS:

Isaiah 63: 16-17. 19-64:2-7
Psalm 80: 2-3. 15-16. 18-19
1 Corinthians 1: 3-9
Mark 13: 33-37

THEME:

“Faithfulness”

FAITHFULNESS

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 will always be remembered throughout history. It has made the world stop and everybody is affected with the spread of the virus. Pope Francis reminds us that we should not see this pandemic as a punishment from God. It is more a judgement on us. We have forgotten what is truly essential in life. Through this pandemic we have once again discovered the beautiful gifts God has given us in this world.

BODY

a) Discovering the essentials of life. Advent is a journey. It is a season of grace. The Lord is giving us another chance, another opportunity to rebuild our lives by building up once again our relationship with Him, with the family, with others and with creation. Let us focus on what are the essentials in life.

Before the pandemic, we thought what we considered essentials like shopping, malling, watching movies and getting the latest gadgets, and focusing on other luxuries of life were so important that we cannot live without them. We manage to survive without them because we were lockdown and we are able to live our lives without the things we considered “essentials”.

What we and many people considered essentials were in reality non-essentials. In fact, we were able to discover many things that gave us joy and accomplishment. Some learned new skills and were able to discover their hidden talents. Others lost their jobs and became more creative in trying to make both ends meet. Still others were able to deepen their

family relationships by eating and praying together and finding more time for one another.

The pandemic helped them enlarged their perspective in life and even the way they understand what it means to be a Church. They came to realize that the Church starts at home and the family is the domestic Church or the Church at home. Through their online attendance of masses, they experienced new ways of praying, loving and serving God. We have much time for prayer During this advent season we continue to discover the essentials of life.

b)What are we to do? The message of the gospel is be ready, be watchful, be attentive all the way. What will we need?

i. Commitment. This is quite difficult to do but it is possible if we pray and ask God to sustain us with His graces. We have the sacraments that sustains the desire and enthusiasm within us.

ii. Wisdom. We need someone to guide and lead us. We have Jesus and His gospel to provide guidance with the help of the Holy Spirit. Oftentimes we are contented about feeling good in life but it is more important to do good and exert effort in being good.

iii. Fortitude. One of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit is this virtue. Very few people talk about it. Fortitude is what Jesus is referring to in today's gospel. It is about making readiness, preparedness and strength as part of our nature. This will be hard and so we need to pray, practice and repeat what we do. It takes time to make something part of ourselves and become a habit. Having fortitude means seeing our problems, struggles and pains as part of life and we are able to overcome them with God's help.

iv. Teamwork. Many people succeed in doing difficult tasks because of the help of others. We tend to be independent and there is a lot of help available. WE have saints to inspire us, we have our family, friends or community to assist us. Sometimes we reach out to others to help them and other times we need to be the one helped.

c) What does being ready mean?

i. We often think of doing something new and yet it is good to also consider the good that we have been doing. Perhaps what we have to do is just to keep doing the good that we have been doing.

ii. Being ready means having faith even if we do not understand the things we do and believe in. It means being a good and a decent person. It means believing in our hearts in God's mercy and forgiveness. It means believing in new beginnings the moment we experience failures.

CONCLUSION

Advent is a time of working our faithfulness to the Lord, strengthening our relationship with Him, with our family, with the community and with God's creation. It is a time to an active waiting that includes preparing. Let us make a new commitment to stay close to Jesus and live our faith each single day.

Most. Rev. Honesto F. Ongtioco, D.D.
Bishop of Cubao



FAITHFUL AND FAITH-FILLED

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

God is Faithful. Humans, weak as we are, need grace and mercy to respond worthily to the faithfulness of God. The Season of Advent invites us to increase our faith through prayer, sacraments and good works.

INTRODUCTION

When we speak of faithfulness, we often think of saints with their halos. We could also think of a husband or wife who “never” cheated to their spouse or perhaps a priest or nun who led a virtuous life. We can also mention that employee who has always been honest and hardworking. Yet human as we are, “our faithfulness” cannot equal to the faithfulness of God. But yes, our little acts of “faithfulness” do reflect the faithfulness of God and a valuable proclamation of the Kingdom that is to come.

BODY

In the First Reading, Prophet Isaiah admits that “we are sinful... all our good deeds are like polluted rags; we have all withered like leaves...” Desperately, the prophet calls out to God because of the unfaithfulness of the people despite God’s goodness to them. Aware of their weaknesses as a nation, he turns to God for refuge. Thus, he calls out: “Return for the sake of your servants!” Does it sound familiar? Did we not call out to the Lord to ask for mercy during the pandemic and the calamities we have experienced? Did we not recognize the sins we have committed against nature when we were devastated? Did we not call him for help? However, like the Israelites who survived the desert and exile, some may have also forgotten about the Lord since we have survived the pandemic and calamities.

For this reason, Jesus speaks to us through his disciples: “Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come.” Yes, we may have survived the eruption, COVID-19, earthquakes, and typhoons. But certainly, the end will come. Jesus will come again. As much as we observe precautions against sickness and disaster, may we also prepare ourselves in facing the Lord anytime.

This is the theme of the Advent Season we commence today. It instills in us the awareness of the coming of the Lord not only in Christmas but also in the last day. In today’s gospel, we are reminded that the coming of the Lord is not something to be afraid of, but to be anticipated. For this reason, we always proclaim our Faith in every Eucharist: “Christ will come again!”

As we await his coming, we are consoled by the words of St Paul in today’s Second Reading: “He will keep you firm to the end, irreproachable on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Even if we forget the goodness of the Lord and despite our shortcomings, God will give us the grace to be firm to the end. Indeed “God is faithful” and “if we are unfaithful, he remains faithful” (2 Timothy 2:13). Our survival is not a reward for our goodness but another opportunity to increase in our faith and be witnesses of His faithfulness.

CONCLUSION

Let us remember that every morning, we are a step closer to the end. Everyday is a day closer to the Lord’s coming. Therefore, we should not waste every opportunity to thank the Lord in prayer and through our good works. Let this prayer we use to invoke in every Mass be our inspiration as we watch and wait for the Lord, especially in this time of pandemic:

“Deliver us, Lord, we pray, from every evil, graciously grant peace in our days, that, by the help of your mercy, we may be always free from sin and safe from all distress, as we await the blessed hope and the coming of our Saviour, Jesus Christ.”

Rev. Fr. Joseph Franz T. Dizon
Parochial Vicar
St. Augustine Parish, Diocese of Malolos



VIGILANCE AND STEWARDSHIP

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

INTRODUCTION

Advent is usually associated with the Christmas season as it is a period of preparation leading us to the celebration of the birth of Christ. However, it's important to remind ourselves that Advent likewise anticipates the second coming of our Savior. And this is evident in the gospel reading. Although it's relatively brief, we can gather from it two significant statements of Jesus that may prove to be substantially relevant to the current observance.

BODY

The First is what he admonishes his disciples: "Be watchful! Be alert!" Jesus wants us to be vigilant of his coming which he compares with the return of the lord of the house from his travel abroad. His servants have no idea when he will be arriving. And so they ought to be vigilant of his arrival.

Vigilance is not simply a matter of waiting and expectation. It requires sensitivity by which one becomes aware and conscious of any indication that the master's return is imminent. That's even much more crucial in our case. For we have no idea not only of when the Lord will come but also of how he will do so. That was surely the mistake of people who were expecting the coming of the Messiah. They never imagined Christ would come as someone born in a manger.

The Second important statement has to do with the respective tasks given to the servants: the master "places his servants in charge, each with his own work." In other words, the servants were also made stewards, giving them responsibilities. And their master expects them to have accomplished these upon his return.

We too are stewards. Each of us has been entrusted not only with responsibilities but also with resources that would help us accomplish our tasks. St. Paul in the second reading thus reminds the Corinthians of how they have been showered with so many blessings and how these would be helpful in waiting for the Lord's return. He writes, "in him you were enriched in every way, with all discourse and all knowledge ... so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ."

We could ask ourselves then: What are the responsibilities the Lord has entrusted to me? And what are the graces have I received to accomplish these? Do I see myself as steward of my life's blessings? Do I use my time, talent and treasures to fulfill God's will?

CONCLUSION

Indeed vigilance and stewardship are two essential elements of our discipleship. They represent the contemplative and active components of Christian life. Vigilance allows us to always relate everything we do to what we joyfully expect at the end of human history, just as stewardship reminds us that the Lord has entrusted us with both concrete blessings and actual responsibilities in the present life while we anticipate his return.

Rev. Fr. Lorenz Moises J. Festin, Ph.D.
Assistant School Director
RCAMES Clusters 1 and 7



WAITING IN HOPE

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

INTRODUCTION

One weekday afternoon while having a conversation with a seminarian-brother, with a deep long sigh he told me, “2020 is really a year full of tragic events’.” And after enumerating series of unfortunate happenings that occurred year round, he then said, “parang di natatapos ang mga bagyo.” Silence took over afterwards and feeling the immensity of recent events, we were lost for words. And in the silent questions that lingered in the air, we were left waiting for answers.

BODY

For the past few weeks as a nation, we were bracing ourselves against one storm after another. It is as if nature conspired to hold homecoming for tropical depressions and chose our country as their meeting place. Pandemic had hit us hard already. It made our lives difficult to the point of paralyzing even the little joy we yearn to have. And as we were just trying to take baby steps in threading towards the future despite the pandemic, storms took us back to square one. And so we are left again storming the heavens with our prayers and questions, “Lord until when? Hanggang Kailan? Yet here we are, waiting for answers. Lord we are waiting. In-aantay po namin kayo.

And so we lend ears of our hearts to our readings today. We are all invited to enter a radical disposition of waiting. In our first reading Isaiah’s words expressed the lament of the exilic community recalling God’s protection and especially the memories of exodus before begging the Lord to come to them once more. It is taken at a time when the Jews were surrounded by enemies and the threat of Babylon, Assyrians

and all those nations were very strong. It was a time of destruction and that is why he says, You, Lord, are our father, our redeemer you are named forever. Why do you let us wander, O Lord from your ways, and harden our hearts for the sake of your servants, the tribes of your heritage.

In their most trying times, they were waiting. Waiting for the Lord to save them. And Isaiah recalled their memories of how faithful God is especially during Exodus when they were fleeing from the grip of the Egyptians. And this remembrance was called forth because Isaiah saw in their suffering how God is still present. He is still faithful. In the immensity of the pain and suffering that we are undergoing it is easier to dwell on despair, to simply give up, to forget the victories we won not even by our strength. But Isaiah chose to remember God's faithfulness and to remain patiently waiting.

This invites us too to look inwardly on what do we do, what do we think or even what to do in moments of waiting? Still we then ask but why do we have to wait? It is because in waiting, we recognize that we can only do as much; it is a kind of surrender to the reality that there would always be something beyond our control. This recognition of surrender must not end in despair but rather on the conviction that someone is greater than all these tragedies we are experiencing.

But how do we wait? Jesus in the gospel made it clear calling out to us: "Be watchful, for you do not know when the time will come. Watch!" Understood in the strict sense, the word "watch" used in this Markan account means to be active, to live, be alive. Simply put, Jesus invites us to wait not passively, surrendering to the whims and drudgeries of the world.

St. Paul in the Second reading reminds the community in Corinth and same goes with us, that Jesus did not leave us waiting empty handed. "In Christ you were enriched in every

way, with all discourse and all knowledge...so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ. And so in recognizing that we are waiting for God's help, waiting for His presence, for His simple touch hoping that He could meet us where we are, we do not simply waste time and go with the flow.

By virtue of remembering God's ways in our lives, in the many times we were given blessings even without asking, we were delivered from one tragedy after another without us knowing it, so we cannot but wait in Hope. For as we remember the first day he came into this world, we also await the day of His Second coming. He has given everything we would be needing in order for us to live life to the full. The very Jesus who promised us that he will come back again as he ascended to heaven, is the same Jesus who promised that he will be with us until the end of time. And so we wait in Hope, for He is faithful.

CONCLUSION

As we lit our First Candle on the advent wreath, we remember our brethren who for the pass weeks were living in darkness because of the tragedies they braved. Those who lost their lives and those who were left behind, seeking answers, waiting for God to tell them why it had to be them who should go through such experience. We do not hold any answers, and words would fall short to express how deep our sadness is as we recall such misfortune, but we lit this first advent candle hoping against hope that its light would be a flicker of courage for our hearts. That even in the midst of the looming darkness that surrounds us, we take this flicker and share it with those who like us are waiting. Waiting for answers, waiting for assurance that they could still live despite the tragedies they faced. We may not know the time wherein He will come again, but as we share this flicker of hope. We become bearers of His light and as we raised this

flicker of hope. We become bearers of His light and as we raised this light against the darkness of this world we as one family of Christians would shout in chorus, O come O come Emmanuel. We are all waiting. We are all hoping. And so we continue to dig deeper into our experiences this advent journey, may this hope guide our way to remember His First coming to this World. And as we wait patiently for His promised coming again, we wait in HOPE, for HE is faithful to His promise.

Mr. Xavier Paul Y. Jacome
Configuration V Seminarian
Archdiocese of Manila



SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

DECEMBER 06, 2020



"One mightier than I is coming after me."

READINGS:

Isaiah 40: 1-5. 9-11

Psalms 85: 9-10. 11-12. 13-14

2 Peter 3: 8-14

Mark 1: 1-8

THEME:

"Hope"

HOPE: A SILENT PRESENCE

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

INTRODUCTION

What Hope can we harvest from this year 2020? Real experiences like global warming, natural calamities such as volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, super typhoons, and the speculated man-made pandemic are putting the world into great fear. A remarkable question that reverberates on all sides is, “when will all these come to an end?” No one could give a right answer but SILENCE. To expect a great deal of ending would mean two different pathways: one is the ending to get out of the situation that is brought by despair, and the other is coming out of the situation in order to move on, that is brought by hope. 'Quo nunc vadis?' Where are you now leading to?

BODY

Silence in the desert captures the image of the human heart that must be empty and bare, and nothing in it, that it may hear the voice crying out in the desert – the interior voice that whispers closely to humanity that divinity takes precedence over and above our worldly concerns. This kind of silence teaches us to realize what to value amidst difficult situations. Nothing in this world could quench our thirst but the affair of divine wisdom and love. That hope is in God and not in this world.

Silence of time disregards the delay of the Lord's coming, for in Him a thousand years could mean a single day. Earthly time therefore is irrelevant to a person who is patiently waiting for His coming. Earthly time is no match to a person living fully of himself in the present moment. God seems silent in our times but we keep on living in righteousness, patience, and peace, God is always on time and present. To live with

God here and now is but placing all our hope in God's time.

Silence of the poor man in the wilderness is the gift of the Gracious God to us. He was John. He was able to speak to the world on behalf of God and did so for our sake – out of great concern he warned us. He prepared a point of encounter between God and man and it entailed a great deal of humility to prepare the way of the Lord.

Silence and poverty are the unrecognized blessings nowadays. To be loud, to be famous, to be recognized and to be materially rich are the name of the game for many of us. But the silence of John has made us all realize that the Advent of Jesus was not all about 'me'. It is the coming of Peace and the incarnation of Grace. A meaningful Christmas celebration is discovered in the silence and poverty of each family; and, with this, hope is very much affirmed and proclaimed.

Silence of good works creates new life and promotes hope in the world. God created the world in silence when he said, 'Let there be... and there was'. Plants grow and yield in silence, flowers bloom silently, man learns and grows also in silence.

CONCLUSION

In other words, Good works when done silently are more noble and fruitful. Let no one notice your good works, for God sees all these in secret. And when no one recognizes your kindness, it is the Lord who will reward you in heaven. In times like these, kindness during pandemic is best appreciated, good works in this low-key Christmas celebration is truly incarnational and grace-filled. This is the right disposition of hope, that in the midst of uncertainties, God works in silence. He is very much present.

Now, may I ask you again, can you harvest Christian Hope amidst all these?

Rev. Fr. Leo Angelo S. Ignacio, Ph. D.
Assitant School Director
RCAMES Clusters 3 and 4



HOMILY GUIDE

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

INTRODUCTION

Life is a constant waiting for what is significant, what is important and what brings us closer to fullness of life. Thus Advent is not just a four-week period of every year that we live; it is a quality/facet of our whole life that makes us face the many questions, while waiting for the answer that Jesus has and is Himself is the answer.

BODY

The Book of the Prophet Isaiah comforts us by affirming that God sends persons who can help us make things right, pave our holes and bumps, and adds meaning to our roller coaster ride of a life. Through people like real friends, we begin to see life in a new way. Their acceptance, trust and love for us renew our outlook in life. Our struggles slowly become learning moments with companions who see life with greater clarity and creativity.

The process of growing up takes time and cannot be rushed. It is so reassuring that time (chronos) is of limited value compared to living in the moment (kairos). Whether we live for twenty or a hundred years, the length of years of our life does not matter as much as the life in those years, when we have found the meaning of our life, and our place in the Father's greater scheme of things, which we call God's Plan.

CONCLUSION

Advent season is the moment when we cleanse our crooked and limiting perspectives, as a prelude to encountering our Savior, who comes to broaden our horizon and expand the breadth of our life through sincere relationships. Thus, rediscovering our relationships with family, friends and

neighbors prepares our hearts for the primary relationship with Jesus. Challenges, which the lockdown during this pandemic brings, make us appreciate better the presence of family in our life. The physical distancing does not prevent the deepening of ties with our friends through creative ways of communication and encounter. The support for our neighbors in need as our expression of solidarity truly broadens our world-view and connects us more intricately as God's People.

Rev. Fr. Edwin E. Mercado

Director
San Carlos Seminary, Configuration Stage



THE GLORY OF GOD WILL BE REVEALED SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

INTRODUCTION

The glory of God will be revealed.
 When people are shut in.
 When all their plans come to nothing.
 When people are forced to be physically distant,
 No place for a hug nor a tap on the shoulder of a friend.
 When smiles are veiled by face masks.
 When storms strike down many houses.
 When mud cover the lives what people built
 and floods sweep them away;
 When people are stripped of all their comforts
 and what is left are tears disguised in the raindrops.
 When winds blow away the hopes
 of reclaiming our normal days:
 Be still and know that Jesus is coming,
 prepare his way and make level his paths,
 The glory of God will be revealed.

BODY

The Heart, the Hands and the Eyes.

How do we prepare the way of the Lord when what we see around is the prolonged effect of the pandemic or the aftermath of a destructive storm? When chaos and fear seem to prevail, what we can prepare is our heart. There in our hearts, no storm can destroy nor any pandemic can make distant, our heart's belongingness to God. And though we are aware of this gift of relationship still, in our experience as human beings, we often times fall into sin and our relationship with God is clouded and so there is a need for reconciliation. It is the call of John the Baptist for all, to repent from our hearts so that we can prepare the way of Jesus. There Jesus will see that our hearts are filled with tears due to the

recent events that shook our ground, yet the tears clear the path for our hearts liberation from our unnecessary attachments. Reconciliation with God heals and strengthens even this wounded and tired heart. Reconciliation is our wealth this time, always reachable there in our hearts. When we are seemingly losing everything around us, still, there in our hearts, a place where God awaits.

How do we prepare the way of the Lord in challenging times? What we can prepare next is our hand. Our hands serve as a door for God's desire to free his people from all misery. During the pandemic we saw how all kinds of volunteers risked their lives in the name of service. We witnessed how many organizations helped the poor. Isn't this a very noble way to prepare the way of the Lord? Just as Jesus picked up Peter when he almost drown, many rescuers generously risked their lives to help those who were affected by the recent typhoons, in our kindness we make straight Jesus' path. Generosity serves as the palm of God, goodness is his hand. When we are seemingly losing all that we possess, God will always extend a hand.

How do we prepare the way of the Lord when the sky is at its darkest and the storms of life cover the light that we long for? It is not easy to keep hoping in these trying times but it takes a leap of faith to discover the greater peace within us, the greater hope that abides in our hearts. To hope is to dare to believe that there is something greater than every storm of life. In that way we prepare our eyes for the coming of Jesus. To hope is to acknowledge that we are under the banner of the love of God. To prepare the way of the Lord is to prepare our eyes to see his love hidden behind suffering. It is the joy of hoping as we await his coming.

CONCLUSION

The glory of God will be revealed.
 When people are shut in but share love inside and out;
 When all their plans come to nothing
 yet they see God in control;
 When people are forced to be physically distant
 but find other ways to be friends;
 When smiles are veiled face masks
 but seen in the eyes of a neighbour;
 When storms strike down many houses
 yet neighbours open their doors;
 When mud cover the lives what people built and floods
 sweep them away yet people still pray;
 When people are stripped of all their comforts
 and what is left are tears but they keep the faith.
 When winds blow away the hopes of reclaiming
 our normal days yet we still see god in all this...
 Be still, we know that Jesus is coming,
 prepare his way and make level his paths,
 For the glory of God will be revealed.

Mr. Alexis M. Miday
 Configuration V Seminarian
 Diocese of Antipolo



SOLEMNITY OF THE
IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
DECEMBER 08, 2020



*“Behold, I am the Handmaid of the Lord.
May it be done unto me according to your word.”*

READINGS:

Genesis 3: 9-15. 20
Psalm 98: 1. 2-3. 3-4.
Ephesians 1: 3-6. 11-12
Luke 1: 26-38

THEME:

“Pueblo Amante
de Maria”

HOMILY GUIDE

SOLEMNITY OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

INTRODUCTION

Many of us are familiar with the term Pueblo Amante de María describing the Filipino nation. But do you know where this phrase came from? It is from the Official Hymn of the 35th International Eucharistic Congress held in Manila in 1937. The song also came to be known as the Himno Eucarístico Filipino. The lyrics of the hymn was written by Emerterio Barcelon and was put into music by Fr. Norberto Carceller, OAR.

BODY

The Eucharistic hymn, describing the Filipino nation and the faith it inherited, says in the third verse in Spanish, *Pueblo amante de María, antes que sus montes de oro, forman su rico tesoro, los tesoros de la cruz*. Roughly translated, “A people in love with Mary, before your golden mountains, form your great treasure, the treasures of the cross.” The song praises the Filipino nation, not only of its rich identity and culture, but of the gift that it received that surpasses all treasures – faith in Jesus.

Being in love with Mary is not just a title, nor a fleeting burst of emotion, loving Mary is being like her, treasuring Jesus in our life. In the Gospel reading on this great solemnity, the angel greeted Mary, “Hail, full of grace!” not because of her own merits or her own actions, but because she will carry Jesus, the Son of God. We are a people in love with Mary, and like her, we will also be full of grace, if we continue to carry Jesus in our hearts.

In the old hymns composed during national events before, we used to hear these kinds of lyrics, praising the nation,

blessing the country, promoting our faith as a community, our love to Mary as a people. They may sound archaic nowadays, but I think we can still learn something from them. The Philippines as a country is dedicated to the Immaculate Conception as our Principal Patroness. Perhaps it is high time for us to go back to that ideal, strengthening our faith as a nation, dedicating once again our lives as a country that believes in God and relies in the help of Mary.

Maybe our faith has become too individualistic, too focused on the self. Christianity for many has become a personal recourse for gratification that has possibly lost its communitarian aspect. Slogans like “to each his own,” “my life, my choice,” “get your rosary out of my ovary,” point to a lifestyle of individualism and indifference. By realizing that our humanity is rooted in the story of Adam and Eve, and how it found redemption in Jesus and Mary, we will learn again how to become, as our Second Reading reminds us, a chosen people, destined in accord with His purpose.

CONCLUSION

The hymn continues, *Y hoy que en su cenit fulgura, irradiando bendiciones a esas paganas regiones, envía beso de amor.* “And now in your zenith glow, you radiate blessings in these unbelieving regions, sending a kiss of love.” Being the *Pueblo Amante de Maria, Bayang Sumisinta kay Maria*, carries with it a mission. As we commemorate the 500 years of Christianity, let us learn from Mary, that loving her is not just a devotional thing, but is fulfilled when we, as a Catholic nation, radiate faith and charity in our mission to peoples.

Rev. Fr. Kali Pietre M. Llamado

Vice Rector

Minor Basilica of the Immaculate Conception



HOMILY GUIDE

SOLEMNITY OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

INTRODUCTION

How did you feel when you heard the news about the nationwide community quarantine? I perfectly remember how I received the announcement that a nationwide community quarantine would be implemented last March. I was afraid! I was already preparing for my summer apostolate and even listed down the things that I must do before the semester ends. Then suddenly, the news about the nationwide community quarantine was announced. We were asked to go back to our provinces to be safe with our families. My plans were all canceled. The apostolate was temporarily suspended. My to-do list was scratched. We all faced the uncertainty of tomorrow. It is human to experience anxiety about the future. If we get caught in the middle of our fears, doubts, and anxieties, we might fall into depression and despair. And so, how do we respond to this fear of the unknown?

BODY

God's Plan of Salvation

- Our celebration today reminds us of God's desire to include us in His plan of salvation. In God's great love and mercy, He chose the Blessed Virgin Mary to be the mother of His Son, through the Holy Spirit. We contemplate the beauty of Mary, who since her conception is already full of grace. There is no room for the stain of sin. She was prepared for this great mission. Mary's role in the history of salvation is unique. The same is true for us. God is with each of us and we all have a mission to fulfill! St. Augustine once said, "We also work, but we are only collaborating with God who works, for his mercy has gone before us!" God wills to include man in His plan of salvation.

- Mary, an ordinary woman from an unpopular town of Nazareth was chosen to become the Mother of God. This

definitely brought a lot of questions and concerns in her life. We now ask: how do we respond in such moments when God seemingly ruins our plans, makes detours in our paths, and brings us to face uncertainty?

A response of generosity and cooperation

- Let us look at Mary's response to God. We, Filipinos, have a special word that does not have a direct translation in other languages. "Opo"—a word of respect and obedience. Mary's fiat was her "opo" to God. God gave Mary the freedom to respond to His invitation. Mary gave her "opo" to God wholeheartedly. We can find three characteristics of Mary which allowed her to generously respond to God's love.

- ORDINARINESS OF MARY. God bestowed her an extraordinary gift! Her ordinariness shows us that she was also human as we are. She felt fear. She was perplexed by the news of the angel. It is human to experience fear especially of the unknown and the uncertain. But it did not leave her paralyzed. In her humanity, in her ordinariness, she posed a question—not because of doubt but because she pondered what implications these would have in her life.

- POVERTY OF MARY. We picture Mary as a simple girl living in a humble village. But more than material poverty, she had spiritual poverty! In a painting that depicts this moment in Mary's life, we find her with a book, the Scriptures. She does not rely on her strength and means, but she continuously draws strength in God's word pondering and keeping them in her heart.

- OPENNESS OF MARY. Through her constant pondering of God's Word, Mary was open to receive God's will in her life. Despite her fear, she believed and trusted in the words of the angel when she heard, "Do not be afraid, you have found favor with God." She responded with generosity and full trust in God's will. She cooperated with God's plan. She used her freedom and offered it to God with her O.P.O.

Our devotion invites us to mission

- We Filipinos are called Pueblo Amante de Maria or “Bayang Sumisinta Kay Maria”. But why do we love Mary so much? Jesuit theologian Fr. Catalino Arevalo said, “To understand Filipino Catholics, one must understand their love for Mary.” We love Mary because we all can relate to her. Her ordinariness shows us that despite our humanity, we can give our wholehearted yes to God! Her poverty encourages us to imitate her utter dependence on God! Her openness that bears the fruit of faith and hope in God’s promise of salvation!

- We may experience different unexpected “annunciations” but our devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary invites us to respond with openness in the direction the Lord is leading us.

CONCLUSION

Pope Francis, in his book *Ave Maria*, offers us a reminder on how do we face life’s “annunciations”: “In the face of this risk of discouragement, God has given us a presence of pure hope, a firm foothold, a certainty that what he is bringing about in us is effective if it is welcomed with faith and cooperation.” Like Mary, God trusts and invites us to participate in His saving action, and our response is our faith in Him partnered with our generous cooperation.

Mr. Justin G. Gatus
Configuration IV Seminarian
Archdiocese of San Fernando, Pampanga



THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

DECEMBER 13, 2020



"I baptize you with water... the one who is coming after me, whose sandal strap I am unworthy to untie."

READINGS:

Isaiah 61: 1-2. 10-11

Luke 1: 46-48. 49-50. 53-54

1 Thessalonians 5: 16-24

John 1: 6-8. 19-28

THEME:

"Joy"

JUST ONE REASON

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

INTRODUCTION

With the overwhelming mishaps in 2020, is Christmas still worth-celebrating? Better say, will there be any Christmas celebration this year? The First reading, taken from the Book of Isaiah, not only reflects the thoughts and prayers of Israel but ours as well. Despite the threats brought by great disruptions like the Taal Volcano eruption, the African Swine Fever outbreak, the numerous impulsive earthquakes, the COVID-19 crisis and eventual loss of jobs, and the many typhoons—the assuring message of the God-presence is all we need to, at least, soothe our sufferings.

BODY

St. Paul, in the second reading, exhorts the Thessalonians, not only to be kept safe for the coming of the Lord, but also to take care of their community. Like the great prophet John in the Gospel, we are not the Light that brightens and shines in the darkness. But we could radiate its light to others ourselves. With the Holy Spirit sent by the Lord to journey with us while awaiting faithfully of the coming of our Lord, we could be the face of hope and harbingers of the Good News.

We have grown to know more of ourselves because of these crises, and become our brothers' keepers! More and more people extend their help, small or big, to those most in need. Evacuations and lockdowns impel us to hold firmly onto our faith in God and in humanity. Our souls will definitely sing their rejoices in God!

CONCLUSION

In this yuletide season, there are so many reasons to cherish and reflect upon that, despite this year's unfortunate

unfortunate events, we still can, or must, celebrate Christmas joyfully. It only takes just one reason to rejoice and be glad: the continual presence of the Divine in each one and for every one of us! Our nation's resilience to trials may not be that which keeps us going, but our faith in God and in everyone does. Let us continue to be missionary disciples in our own ways.

Most Rev. Jose S. Palma, D.D.
Archbishop of Cebu
Chairman, CBCP Committee on
International Eucharistic Congress



JESUS IS OUR JOY

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

INTRODUCTION

Amidst overwhelming struggles and risks to ensure adequate education for millions of Filipino children in time of COVID-19 pandemic, I came across a story of Cecilia Sadang who has been teaching for the past nine years in San Pedro National High School in Iriga City, Camarines Sur. She shared that despite the challenging times teachers should remain strong and committed to their profession. “We are facing a very difficult situation, but I am happy with my fellow teachers because I see their dedication, enthusiasm, determination and love for the work.” Indeed, such a Joy emanates beyond the call of duty.

BODY

Joy goes beyond human boundaries. Today we celebrate the Third Sunday of Advent, also known as Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete Sunday is a day of rejoicing. The Joy that stems from the Lord is a grace that freely given to us. The Lord brings us to raging realities that beyond our human limitations. When we encounter that experience of Joy, it seeks humble affirmation within ourselves a profound existence of our identity and our purpose.

Joy manifests in the life of a true witness. John the Baptist is a symbol of a true witness. “even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal” John remains of who he really is with uttered humility that “I am the voice of one crying out in the desert”, ‘Make straight way of the Lord’. Indeed, the Joy of a true witness testifies less about oneself so that there will be space for others. The true witness glimpses at the horizon in searching for Joy. Believing that true Joy is larger than oneself and true Joy radiates when one witnesses the goodness and generosity from self-giving for the good of others.

and generosity from self-giving for the good of others.

Our educators play an important role in time of COVID-19 pandemic. Their relentless commitment and determination awaken the call beyond duty. What brings them joy is not who they are but how students will become in ensuring that learning must take place even outside classroom setting and even amidst the threat of pandemic. It is indeed our clarion call to expand our horizon, to affirm who we really are, to become voice for others, and to celebrate the gift of Jesus' joy.

CONCLUSION

The profound value of Joy lies not in the center stage of our life. It is when we go out of ourselves like a heart burning and direct its light that gives testimony of a life that points to the One. Joy is a voice “that cries in the wilderness” that confesses “I am not” but “prepares the way of the One who is to come.”

Jesus is the ultimate Joy as he is our Joy. The true Joy lies when we go beyond our human frailties and limitations. It is by becoming true witness of the Lord that we may experience such ineffable Joy as one becomes the image and instrument of Joy for others. Thus, Joy is gift that must be shared.

Br. Clemence B. Posadas, SSS
Scholastic
Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament



FIRST DAY OF SIMBANG GABI

DECEMBER 16, 2020



"He was a burning and shining lamp."

READINGS:

Isaiah 56: 1-3. 6-8

Psalms 67: 2-3. 5. 7-8

John 5: 33-36

THEME:

"Year of the Faith"

HOMILY GUIDE

FIRST DAY OF THE SIMBANG GABI

INTRODUCTION

On 11 October 2012, the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Benedict XVI opened the Year of Faith; it ended on the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Universal king on 24 November 2013.

From PORTA FIDEI of Pope Benedict XVI: I have spoken of the need to rediscover the journey of faith so as to shed ever clearer light on the joy and renewed enthusiasm of the encounter with Christ... In the light of this, I have decided to announce a year of faith. We want this year to arouse in every believer the aspiration to profess faith in fullness and with renewed conviction, with confidence and hope. It will also be a good opportunity to intensify the celebration of faith in the liturgy, especially in the Eucharist, which is the summit towards which the activity of the Church is directed and also source from which all its powers flows. At the same time, we make it our prayer that believers' witness of life may grow in credibility. To rediscover the content of faith that is professed, celebrated, lived and prayed, and to reflect on the act of faith, is a task that every believer must make his own, especially in the course of this year. (CREED, CULT, CODE)

BODY

As Christians, we are called to bear witness to Jesus. During the Year of Faith in 2013, Pope Benedict XVI sought to rekindle the aspiration in every believer to profess the faith in fullness and with conviction. On this first day of our Simbang Gabi, we wish to rekindle our response to that invitation using the witness and example of St. John the Baptist as presented in our Gospel.

Pope Francis during his homily for Mass at Santa Marta on 16 December 2016 described the role of John the Baptist as the pointing finger: a man whose finger is always pointing to another. From the Gospel we read: When people came to ask him, Who are you? He replied: I am not the Messiah (Jn 1:20), I am a voice in the desert crying out: Make straight the way of the Lord! (Jn 1:23). The next day, when John caught sight of Jesus coming toward him, he exclaimed: Look, there is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! (Jn 1:29).

In the same homily, Pope Francis summarized: John the Baptist is “the lamp that points to the light, the voice that points to the Word, the preacher of repentance and baptizer who points to the true baptizer in the Holy Spirit”.

As Filipino Catholics, we too are challenged to share that important calling: to point and lead others to Christ. To make this happen, the following may help us:

- To have an intimate and personal relationship with Jesus. Each one of us may have our own stories on how we came to know about Jesus: through members of the family who introduced us to God through prayers and devotions, catechesis, scriptures and the sacraments; through the parish and schools where the faith was deepened and explained. All these contributed in the deepening of our personal knowledge about Jesus.

But we also need to move from knowing about Jesus to knowing Jesus: a personal encounter with Him as someone living and inviting us to enter into a life-long personal relationship with Him. (Who is Jesus for me? What is the face of Jesus for me?)

- To make our lamps shine brightly. We are going through a lot of difficulties now: the COVID-19 pandemic, the natural calamities that have affected the lives of many of us including the devastation brought about by the typhoons that hit

the country one after the other, the many uncertainties and fears that each one faces every day.

It is during this moment of darkness that we most need to keep our lamps shining brightly. We can inspire others by being faithful to God (trusting and holding on to Him), by choosing to do what is good and right, by being compassionate and merciful to those in need of help. (Inspiring stories of people who dedicated themselves in helping others in spite of their own difficulties) In the end, we share our faith testimonies to help others see how we experienced God journeying with us through all these.

- To allow our voices to proclaim God's message. We can be bearers of hope to others by proclaiming the truth. In the midst of many and at times conflicting opinions, we are called to proclaim the truth that comes from the Scriptures and teachings of the Church to guide and enlighten others especially in making decisions and choosing their courses of actions.

CONCLUSION

The year 2020 will soon be over. To all of us, this year has brought many real challenges and life-changing experiences. But this year also made us rediscover our faith in God that has given us the strength to face and overcome difficulties. From the gospels we read stories of people who after encountering Jesus lead others to Him. We are reminded of John bringing his brother James, of Andrew bringing his brother Simon, of Philip inviting Bartholomew to meet Jesus from Nazareth. After re-encountering the Lord, we are now invited to point and direct others to Jesus. May our stories inspire others to re-encounter Jesus anew and to profess the faith with renewed conviction.

The Son of Man has come to search out and save what was lost. (Luke 19:10); I came that they may have life and have it to the full (John10:10).

Rev. Fr. Joselito R. Martin
Rector
San Carlos Seminary



CHRISTIANS OR CATHOLICS?

FIRST DAY OF THE SIMBANG GABI

INTRODUCTION

In several instances, I was asked regarding the difference between these two words: Catholics and Christians. Are they related or the same? What do you think? Remember this: not all Christians are Catholics but all Catholics are Christians. The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch and we read that in Acts 11:26. Remember that when we speak of Roman Catholicism, we refer to the belief and practices of Christians under the authority of the Bishop of Rome who is the direct successor of Peter and the Apostles.

BODY

It is best to start our nine days of Simbang Gabi knowing and understanding our Catholic faith. In 2013, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI announced the beginning of the Year of Faith in his Apostolic Letter, *Porta Fidei*. He reminded us that in order to enter the door of Faith, one must embark on a journey that will last a lifetime. That journey started when we were baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Do you remember your baptismal birthday? What is the origin of your name? We have a very good tradition in the Church where persons are given the names of the saints. Have you ever asked the reason behind that practice?

Part of our Catholic Faith is the belief in the resurrection and the communion of saints. *Porta Fidei* says, “We must rediscover a taste for feeding ourselves on the word of God, faithfully handed down by the Church...Do not labor for the food which perishes but for the food which endure to eternal life.” (Jn 6:27)

In our gospel reading today (John 5:33-36), Jesus answers the charges of his opponents, “What evidence can you produce that your claims are true?” Jesus cited John the Baptist who had repeatedly bore witness to him even up to death. He who foretold Jesus’ coming and witnessed to what God had in mind for his people. In the end through his own martyrdom, John’s life was a brilliant illumination of truth for the people who walked in darkness.

CONCLUSION

Let us rediscover our Catholic Faith as we start the Simbang Gabi. Let us be good Catholics every day. Let us be shining example to all.

Rev. Fr. Emmanuel S. Regalado, LRMS
Director
Kong Hua Chinese School



JESUS IS OUR LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

FIRST DAY OF THE SIMBANG GABI

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has shattered global consciousness and has brought nightmare at the start of the year 2020. A single microscopic organism has redefined and redirected human safety, lifestyle, and even life. The life's approaches strive to embrace the "new normal" that succumbs to social distancing, home quarantine, health protocols and precautions.

BODY

The whole world has witnessed the horror of people dying brought about by the pandemic. While the pandemic remains at the mainstream, the aftermath of Typhoon Rolly and Typhoon Ulysses escalated the prevalent preoccupation in the local level. There are innumerable life experiences that convey loss of financial stability, disturbing health care system, loss of jobs and livelihood, economic and political distress, and even the temporarily closure of the churches.

Amidst this darkness, we recognize our helplessness. We turn to God but it seems that he is absent. It seems that he does not hear our groaning. We feel that God is so silent. Christmas is approaching and we find it difficult to find reason to celebrate. We are left in total darkness. But the eyes of faith see that he is with us. There is an inner voice that tells us to remain steadfast in faith. The prophet Isaiah assures us of the joy awaiting for those who are holding on to the Lord. The responsorial psalm gives us hope of the graciousness of God. We hope for light and we see his light. His light burns brightly and continues shining in our darkness for he is the source of light.

Jesus knows our sufferings. Our faith assures us that God has never distanced himself from us nor abandoned us. He remains faithful to his promise that he is the Emmanuel, the God-with-us. He is united with our sufferings. Remember, Jesus embraced our sufferings by emptying himself even to the point of death. His suffering such a sublime self-giving out of love as he offers his body and blood in the Eucharist. We hold on to Jesus through our profound faith on him. We hope for his love and mercy as we entrust everything to him. We are certain that all shall be well for he wants us to be well.

In the gospel, Jesus recognizes John the Baptist as a burning and shining lamp. But he is greater than John the Baptist because he is the source of light. With our faith in Christ, we are impelled to carry and share his light. As bearers of light, we must manifest it into concrete actions so that others may see and encounter that light. Indeed, the light of Christ illumines the darkness of our lives and the lives of others, bridges the gap of social distancing, radiates care and healing, and inspires us to be one with him and with one another.

CONCLUSION

As we start the first day of Simbang Gabi, may we see and share the light of Christ. Let his light shine through the darkness of human suffering. Our firm faith brings us hope that everything will be better. There is no darkness in Christ for he is the Light.

Br. Eddienel G. Villa, SSS
Scholastic
Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament



SECOND DAY OF SIMBANG GABI

DECEMBER 17, 2020



“Of her was born Jesus who is called the Christ.”

READINGS:

Genesis 49: 2. 8-10
 Psalm 72: 1-2. 3-4, 78
 Matthew 1: 1-17

THEME:

“Year of the Laity”

LAY PEOPLE CALLED TO MISSION

SECOND DAY OF THE SIMBANG GABI

INTRODUCTION

When I was a young boy going to the Simbang Gabi I remember an inner grumbling I had as I listen to the reading of the gospel of today. "It is already an effort to get up early in the morning and it is an effort to pay attention to the readings, and now we have this reading. What on earth is the relevance of all these strange names read to us?" Maybe some of you may also have this thought.

Only years later on, did I realize how these names are significant in our preparation for the coming of the Savior. God came on earth to participate in our human situation. It is part of our human situation that we do not fall straight down from the sky. As human beings we belong to a family, to a clan, to a people. We have ancestors, people who had gone before us. So also Jesus. He had His own ancestry. These were people who had gone ahead of Him.

BODY

Jesus came from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. From Jacob he took the line of the tribe of Judah. Then he came from the line of David. We do not know all the people mentioned among the ancestry of Jesus. Some them though we know, and many of them were not good people. They belonged to the kingly line and many were condemned in the Bible as bad kings who led the people astray. In a word, the ancestry of Jesus is a mixed ancestry of good and bad people.

Is this not also true to everyone of us? When we look at our family, at our lolos, lolas, titos, titas and cousins, we see that not all are good. There are also bad ones. There are those whom we can be proud of and there are those whom

we would rather not be associated with. This is true for all of us. This is also true for Jesus. In spite of the unworthiness of many of his ancestors, the flow of salvation continued. God's plan will not be frustrated by our sins and those of our ancestors. The current of grace is stronger than the current of sin. Is this not good news?

There is another point worth pondering. Jesus did not come from the line of priests – which is the tribe of Levi, and in particular from the lineage of Aaron. He came from the line of kings – that of Judah and David. We are asked to reflect today on the role of the laity in the church. The lay people are the baptized faithful who are not ordained as priests. The laity make up the vast majority of our people. In this church today, I am the only one who does not belong to the laity. And know what? Jesus, the Savior did not come from the priestly group. He belonged to the laity. In fact he was an ordinary Jew without any title at all and without any particular function in their religious hierarchy.

This should make us think. The lay faithful are not second class Christians. Their dignity as children of God is no less than the priests, the bishops and the religious. They are called to holiness as much as the priests. They have a role in the work of salvation as the clergy. Gone are days when people thought that the work of the church are to be done solely by the priests and the lay faithful just offer a supporting role. They just follow the priests.

I well remember when I was a young priest, an old lady, and a distinguished lawyer at that, often told me. “Father, just tell us what to do, and we will follow.” Even now, some may think that this is virtuous. Does this not breed dependency and subservience? Yes, we are called to be humble and to be obedient, but there are some areas in life where the lay should lead and not just follow.

We are clearly told that the mission of the laity is to imbue the temporal, secular realities with the message and spirit of the Gospel. This is the sphere of economics, politics, business, sports, entertainment, family and education. Here the lay people should lead. Why should the lay person ask the priest: “Father, whom shall we vote?” Should not the priest rather instead ask the lay person: “Sis, whom shall we vote?”

To be Christian is to live the faith and bear witness to the faith wherever we are. We are Christians not only in church but also in our homes, also in our offices, also in the municipal hall, also in the store, also in the factory. There we live the faith and there we are not ashamed to speak of the love of our life, Jesus our friend. Do we do so? Remember that Jesus was not a priest but he preached! He was a lay person, an ordinary person. He spoke about God His Father, and he even called to task the priests and teacher of the law. He was criticizing them and reprimanding them for their abuses and lack of concern for the people. So you can just imagine how hurt and angry were the priests of his time that they connived to eliminate him.

The main allegiance of Jesus was to his Father rather than to the religious leaders. This is also the obedience that is being asked from all of us Christians – our main obedience is to God. Our allegiance is to the Almighty alone. The priests should lead us to God, but they too are under the judgment of God. This is why the priests are the servants of the Word, and not masters or owners of the Word of God. They preach the Word of God and not their own ideas and agenda. The priests have the expertise in the liturgy, in theology, in spirituality. They studied these. But in finance? In running a business, in investing money, in construction, in politics, in law, in health care? There are lay people who have studied these and priests have to consult and listen to them.

Not only was Jesus a lay person, He was dependent on lay people. Mary and Joseph, both lay person, supported Jesus when he was most vulnerable, as a baby and a child. Even when he was doing ministry, day to day needs were provided by women and men who supported him and his apostles. The role of the lay is indispensable in the work of salvation, not only the work of the priests.

CONCLUSION

Imagine what would happen if the lay people were to take their mission in the world seriously. We would have upright politicians because they will be the ones voted by enlightened lay people. There would be no corruption because the lay people who all be honest. There would be equal distribution of wealth because all the rich and those in business would be righteous. Our environment would be clean because all would care for our common home. Just imagine... if we have transformed lay people! Empowered lay people would really transform our nation!

Most. Rev. Broderick S. Pabillo, D.D.
Apostolic Administrator
Archdiocese of Manila



GOD ROOTING FOR US

SECOND DAY OF THE SIMBANG GABI

The Genealogy is not only a litany of names belonging to a span of three fourteen generations, it establishes the fulfillment of the much-awaited promise in the person of Jesus and awakens us to celebrate and embrace our humanity.

INTRODUCTION

We might all be wondering when we could possibly return to the family and clan reunions we used to enjoy before the pandemic. While many would probably look forward to these gatherings because of the food, the exchange of gifts, the humor and the bantering among different generations, it is the pure simple fun coupled with colorful family stories told and retold from of old and by the “olds” that contribute to making great the time of being together. Their presence and stories help us to know more about the family where we belong and come from. Reunions can help one appreciate his own roots. Browse the net and you will find websites claiming that they help trace one’s ancestry. It is important to know your roots, one says, “after all, your family story is the story that leads to you.”

BODY

This text from the Gospel according to Matthew (1: 1-17) digs deep into the history of Jesus’ human family. More than a litany of names belonging to a span of three fourteen generations starting from the patriarch Abraham down to Joseph, the husband of Mary, the Genealogy establishes the fulfillment of the much-awaited promise.

1. God entered the life and history of a people.

In His wisdom and perfect design, God willed to enter our history and embraced our humanity by becoming man, by becoming a member of a human family. God's fidelity is manifested in this. God's incarnation is the fulfillment of the prophecy intimated in the First Reading: "A shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse and from his roots a bud shall blossom (Isaiah 11:1)". The coming of Jesus serves as the highest point of Israel's history and attests the continuity of God's providential plan for his people.

God continues to enter the life and history of a people. We thank the missionaries who sowed the seeds of faith in our native land and has made us a bastion of Catholicism in this part of the globe. Our nine-year preparation for the 500th Anniversary of the Arrival of Christianity in our country must lead us to a deeper appreciation of the faith we have received. It is a faith that must always be confessed, celebrated and communicated.

2. Uncover your roots, discover yourself.

When God chose to enter a family to be his own, He chose a lineage that is not perfect. Like in any tree, there are crooked branches and rough edges. Jesus' lineage is one that is not without faults and failings. (The parade of names might have caused you to yawn or sigh. Some of them were not even heard of. There are names whose backgrounds reveal much of a controversy.) Abraham lied and pretended that Sarah was his sister to save his life. Jacob received his father's blessing after deceiving him. Judah was one of those who sold his own brother Joseph (the Dreamer). David had an affair with the wife of his key man. Not to mention the women in this list who also each had an intriguing story.

Is this not true about our own families? Our families are far from being perfect because each family consists of imperfect people, marred by sin! As we reflect upon our own journey, we realize our contribution to this corporate imperfection because of our own sin, our weaknesses and our own inadequacies. “There is no such thing as the perfect family,” said Pope Francis. “Only by the daily experience of forgiveness can a family grow.”

Jesus’ incarnation teaches us to embrace our own roots, our own history, the people, circumstances and events that helped shape who we are today. To understand our unique selves is to understand our own family history. When we have done this, we can learn to look at ourselves and our future in a new way. If a past is explored, the present can be better understood and a brighter future can be built by refusing to make the same mistakes or sinful actions our ancestors made. Learn from the past, convert it to wisdom, and allow it to influence the tapestry being created in the present with eyes set for a future in and with God.

When Jesus traced his roots, he was “rooting” for you and me to support us in embracing our own humanity. The gospel today, therefore challenges us to celebrate that humanity. For to be fully and truly human is to reveal God. We reveal God in our existence, in our very being. We glorify God with our lives carefully guarding the divine image imprinted in our humanity.

3. Rediscover the truth: we are one big family.

“We are never completely ourselves unless we belong to a people (Gaudete et Exultate, 6).” We cannot know ourselves apart from a broader network of relationships. The pandemic has surprisingly brought us to an affirmation that everything is connected and that we need one another.

Mahalaga ang bawat isa. Kailangan natin ang bawat isa. Kailangang magkaisa. The Gospel is a summons especially to the laity, the majority of the people of God, towards a greater involvement and participation in the life of our immediate community, our parish that also hopefully overflows to our government and the global community. The Church in mission draws us to expand our frontiers and overcome barriers, man-made or otherwise, so as to include everyone and build up the family of mankind.a

CONCLUSION

God entered our history “to be you” and me so that we can be like Him. Jesus’ incarnation moves us to celebrate and elevate our humanity.

Rev. Fr. Roy Rexelle M. Decena
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ORDINARY, SAINTLY

SECOND DAY OF THE SIMBANG GABI

INTRODUCTION

This time of the pandemic, we have seen various faces of heroism in the country. We recognize the toil of our medical experts, our providers of our essential needs, those who safeguard our surroundings, those who contribute to monetary assistance, to church leaders and servants, to the media, and to all who took part of the everyday scenario of the pandemic. These people may seem to be a nobody for some, but their act of heroism in the midst of threat deserves a great price to embrace.

It is notable that the stories and history of our frontliners and other heroes of our time would come not from a known or famed background. Some began from a simple exercise of medicine, some came from a family whose heart is well-known for their generosity, some came from a personal story of kindness that in a way, their service today is their pay back time. Though the pandemic seemed to be a tragic one, but this time in history proved that in the midst of thorns, roses can blossom. In the midst of the pointed guns, heroes can come alive. In the midst of the temptation to be selfish, there rose people who generously offered their lives. More than the crown of saintliness and heroism, God is the crown of their life. God is the honor and the force that made them do a holy and a saving mission. Despite the past and the painful present, with God, they conquer and grow tall and strong.

BODY

Our readings for today exemplifies simple and ordinary people who fought for holiness and heroism despite who they are. Judah and his brothers shared in both grief and

happiness in their life as leaders. But the hope to move on and be strengthened with the lessons of the past did not harm or deceive them to persevere in holiness. God was their crown in order to lead peacefully. On the same manner, the Gospel spoke of many names and personalities. Some that were included here were not of a saintly or holy living. Some lived a life of harlotry, some lived an unfortunate life, some lived a sinful life, some lived in an obscure way of life. One could not even imagine that a savior would come from this kind of family. But what makes them capable of their crown of Godliness and heroism, their perseverance, their attitude to hold on the God's promise of mercy, and that growing desire to show the beautiful rays of God.

CONCLUSION

Becoming a hero and a saint comes from a never-ending hope and perseverance. What a sinful past can do to make us feel less is so little than to how God can manifest his great power. For these men and women, both in the present and in the past, the crown of being saints and heroes roots from their union with God. They have been face to face with their sins and their past, but what they saw beautifully are the days ahead for them to heal, to renew, and to regain dignity and name. Their past was not a hindrance to go on with today and the future. In the many imperfections, a hero can shine, a saint can be known, a savior can be born for us.

Though Jesus came from a lineage of kings or noble people, the vast names of his line has some tinges of darkness and errors. But our hope is in this family and this trend of communion: that even with the sinful and worst past. A saint shall rise, a hero shall conquer, and most of all, a savior shall come to redeem. Like our modern-day heroes and saints, who would have known that such kind and heroic hearts would stand-up even in the midst of their own situations and difficulties? Little did we know, that even in the

midst of oppositions and even threats, a good bud of holiness and heroism can shine. What had been so bad may shake us down, but claiming God as the crown, we can shine forth and show that goodness can come from us. With the series of both sinfulness and even despair, the Word Made Flesh shall shine. With the many experiences of pain and even the course of humiliation, God can show himself, God is there.

The crown of Godliness and heroism stems from an ordinary and simple life. One needs not the grandeur of life in order to be saintly and to be heroic. Even the imperfections of life and history has nothing to do with one's capacity to be a saint and to be a hero. Knowing the Lord and his Divine Plan makes us worthy to enjoy the blessing of the crown of Godliness and heroism.

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THIRD DAY OF SIMBANG GABI

DECEMBER 18, 2020



*“Behold, the virgin shall be with child and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel.”*

READINGS:

Jeremiah 25: 5-8

Psalms 72: 1-2, 12-13, 18-19

Matthew 1: 18-25

THEME:

“Year of the Poor”

MERCY AND COMPASSION

THIRD DAY OF THE SIMBANG GABI

INTRODUCTION

*We are all God's children.
We are all the same.
He is calling us by name
to help the poor and lame
and learn what life is really for.
It's to know and love and serve the Lord!*

-We are All God's Children by Jamie Rivera (2015)

Do these words evoke a sentimental emotion? Does it remind you of a significant experience?

Jamie Rivera popularized the song during the visit of Pope Francis to the Philippines on 2015. Why did the Holy Father visit our country? His visit was intended for the survivors of the Super typhoon Yolanda that more than 6,000 people died and four million people lost their homes.

One of the striking moments of the Holy Father's visit was the papal audience with the youth at the University of Santo Tomas. Pope Francis encountered Glyzelle Palomar, a 12 year old girl who was forced to forage food from garbage and sleep on cardboard mats before being rescued by a non-governmental organization, Tulay ng Kabataan Foundation. Glyzelle told the Pope, "There are many children neglected by their own parents. There are also many who became victims and many terrible things happened to them like drugs and prostitution. Why is God allowing such things to happen even if it is not the fault of the children? And why are there only few people helping us?"

Pope Francis embraced the young girl and used the opportunity to point out a glaring truth. “Glyzelle is the only one who has put a question to which there is no answer,” said the Pope. He further reminded the faithful gathered at the university that Jesus did not merely pass by the people he encounter in their most difficult situation. He listened and sympathized with them. Pope Francis challenged all who listened, “It is only when we learn to cry with those who are suffering that we begin to understand them and to love them.”

BODY

The Gospel of Matthew 1:8-25 on the birth of Jesus the Messiah offers us the following reflection:

a) Mary is found to have a child by the power of the Holy Spirit before she lived with Joseph. This shows that the birth of Jesus is not of human origin despite the Matthean genealogy. Jesus was not born through a biological father but through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God works in ways we cannot imagine.

b) Joseph being a righteous man and unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace planned to dismiss her quietly. He was placed in a very problematic situation. Will he divorce her quietly and thus follow the Law of Moses? Doing so will leave Mary alone and she will be ostracized by her family. Joseph, in good conscience, could not do that. Logically speaking, Mary is suspected of adultery. However, the innocence theory prevailed since Joseph saw something supernatural in Mary’s conception with the help of the angel in his dream. More than the law and the logic of this world, it is to follow God’s plan that matters the most.

c) An angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your

wife.” The experience of fear is common among us especially in this abnormal situation, living in the midst of a pandemic. Such is acceptable. But our God is greater than our fears.

CONCLUSION

Mary’s virginal conception and Joseph’s decision to take Mary as his wife go beyond human understanding. It leads us to the Poverty of explanation that is convincing to the human mind. As Pope Francis reiterated during his meeting with the youth in the University of Santo Tomas, “Be courageous, do not be afraid to cry!”

Let us do the following on this third day of the Simbang Gabi:

a) Embrace Lady Poverty. For St. Francis, Lady Poverty is symbolic of the Poor Christ. She is the symbol of the paradox of the Gospel: richness in Poverty, life in death, strength in weakness, love in detachment and deprivation.

b) Accept Lady Poverty as God’s indwelling among us. “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus who though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself.” (Phil 2:5-7)

c) Surrender to God. Rely on God and never on our human nature as we face and experience Poverty in different forms.

Msgr. Noly A. Que, LRMS
Rector
Lorenzo Mission Institute



IT REALLY HURTS

THIRD DAY OF THE SIMBANG GABI

INTRODUCTION

It really hurts! Ang magmahal ng ganito (loving like this). This is one of the most popular songs on going right now. And it even has a dance step. Hearing the gospel, Joseph was having a hard time being the husband of Mary. Indeed, it really hurts. Imagine, maybe the people back then were making fun of him, how come you fathered a child in the person of Mary, she's just a teenager? How can you impregnate her if you did not have any marital relationship with her? Hearing these words from other people would really hurt one's heart.

BODY

What was Joseph's reaction to these hurts, to these hurting words of the people back then? He was planning to divorce Mary quietly. Is that good? Is that love? Of course not! Love is not only experienced in good times but very much needed in bad times. Joseph was having inconveniences back then and just because of it, he's going to back down already? He's going to give up! No! Love until it hurts. True love hurts.

Nowadays, many people are being inconvenienced by this pandemic. Many families are having a hard time coping especially in the aspect of livelihood. Many families are struggling financially. It also hurts them to the point that some of them just like Joseph would want to end these struggles.

CONCLUSION

Are you losing hope right now that you want to give up? Just look at Saint Joseph! He was hurt. He was struggling. He was having a hard time. He was suffering but he was suffering gracefully. He did push himself to keep going and stayed with Mary. And how did the Annunciation to Joseph end? He became the father of Jesus.

Are you about to give up right now because it really hurts? Never! Be like Joseph! Persevere until the end.

Mr. Norman M. Gandia
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FOURTH DAY OF SIMBANG GABI

DECEMBER 19, 2020



*“Do not be afraid, Zechariah,
because your prayer has been heard.”*

READINGS:

Judges 13: 2-7, 24-25

Psalms 71: 3-4, 5-6, 16-17

Luke 1: 5-25

THEME:

“Year of the Family
and the Eucharist”

HOMILY GUIDE

FOURTH DAY OF THE SIMBANG GABI

INTRODUCTION

A research was conducted in 1948 at Harvard University, on the usage and effects of names. The study noted that names tell us a lot about who we are. It traces the origin of our name, the consensual affection of our parents, the condition when we were born and even the socio political and climate situation of the time.

The new name of a child brings not just an identity and new sense of belonging to a family but a joy of “welcome, presence and support” (Directory for Catechesis no. 262) from the community.

BODY

The two readings on this 4th day of the Simbang Gabi speak about the identity of a person with a name or recognizing a person without a name. It tells us to trust in God and the rest is secondary (cf. Ps 37:7a). It situates us to a family, as St. John Paul II said during his homily in Perth, Australia “as the family goes, so goes the nation and so goes the whole world in which we live.” (November 30, 1986)

In the first reading, the wife of Manoah, who was barren and had no children, witnessed the appearance of an angel, telling her that she will conceive and bear a son. She relayed the message to her husband: “A man of God came to me; he had the appearance of an angel of God, fearsome indeed. I did not ask him where he came from, nor did he tell me his name.” The couple recognized that the message came from

God. Their faith tells them that the messenger was a man of God. He had an appearance of an angel of God (v.6). The good news is truly authentic, trustworthy and gratefully rejoicing. For Manoah and his wife, “the family is the setting in which a new life is not only born but also welcomed as a gift of God” (Amoris Laetitia no. 166).

The Gospel narrates to us the experience of Zechariah and Elizabeth. An angel appeared to Zechariah while he was administering the priestly services. It is worth noting to know that the angel, warned him “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, because your prayer has been heard.” The words of the angel set the tone of the Gospel. The words of the angel: “your prayer has been heard,” is a 100% assurance of what God really wants for this family. “Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall name him John.” (v. 13) The angel also revealed the meaning of the name John, manifesting how gracious God is. “You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of [the] Lord.... He will be filled with the holy Spirit even from his mother’s womb, and he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of fathers toward children and the disobedient to the understanding of the righteous, to prepare a people fit for the Lord.”

CONCLUSION

The Angel has delivered the good news and invites us to believe and “not to be afraid.”

Do not be afraid to trust in God even as we walk seemingly “blind,” for faith is certain yet obscure, free yet morally obliging, reasonable yet beyond natural reason, an act yet a process, a gift yet our doing (cf. National Catechetical Directory for the Philippines no. 202).

Do not be afraid so as to see God's action in our life and to tell stories on how gracious God is to us, even in the midst of the pandemic and the typhoons – Quinta, Rolly, Siony and Tonyo and Ulysses.

Do not be afraid to kneel down and pray as a family, like Zechariah and Elizabeth did, as we face the post COVID new normal, confident that God always listens and provides.

Do not be afraid to get down from “your balconies” (Christus Vivit no. 143) and get involved in creative and resourceful ways to break bread with the needy and to serve as the Lord has blessed us.

Do not be afraid to stop and stoop down, as the Good Samaritan did, be on the side and to take care of the abused and persecuted as well as the neglected and abandoned.

Do not be afraid to walk and work with other people, putting yourself on the line and getting your hands dirty, proclaiming that we can live together as God's family in peace and harmony.

Do not be afraid to renew your desire to receive the "body of Christ" in Holy Communion, after this community quarantine.

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THE FILIPINO FAMILY: MISSIONARY DISCIPLES OF THE EUCHARIST FOURTH DAY OF THE SIMBANG GABI

INTRODUCTION

The room where I have been staying for the past years in my ministry among the students of the Archdiocese of Manila is situated along the busy street of Oroquieta across the famous SVD Catholic Trade. One morning, as I looked out the window, I saw a rat lying in the middle of the road. The rat seems to be enjoying the heavy rain. I was watching how the rat will end his life because I am certain that one of the cars passing by will surely hit it. Its fate finally ended when a car crushed it to pieces. I was just an onlooker!

Next year will be the 500th anniversary of the first Eucharistic celebration and the first baptism in the Philippines. The CBCP mapped out a nine-year preparation with each year's theme leading to the reigniting of the missionary role of Filipino Catholics in Asia and the world. The first four themes were as follows: Integral Faith Formation (2013), The Laity (2014), The Poor (2015), and The Filipino Family: Missionary Disciples of the Eucharist (2016). The last theme was intended for the 51st International Eucharistic Congress and the Year of the Family.

BODY

How do we describe the Filipino family? How is your family? What are your concerns? Based on a 2018 report prepared by the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) and the UNICEF-Philippines, the state of the Filipino family is as follows:

a) 31.4% of children are living below the poverty line in the entire country and 63.1% in ARMM;

b) 2.85 million children ages 5-15 are out-of-school. It is noteworthy that this figure has drastically increased brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic;

c) There is an increasing rate of violence against children: 2 out of 3 experienced violence, 2 out of 5 experienced psychological violence, 1 out of 4 experienced sexual violence and 2 out of 3 experienced peer violence.

The NEDA-UNICEF report highlights an alarming fact, “The Philippines is a service, transit, and destination country for commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking, and one of the top ten producers globally of sexual content using children.”

In one way or another, we have seen these data firsthand. It may be an experience of a friend, a classmate, or a co-worker. How did we deal with this kind of experience? Did we act for the good of the victim? Or did we just pretend that we know nothing about it because, after all, we are just on-lookers?

Children are not rats. We cannot simply look and watch our children while they are being used and abused in malevolent ways. Children are born out of love no matter how imperfect that love might be and families should nurture them in love. A family anchored on love builds a society and a nation that is pleasing to God.

The visit of Gabriel to Zechariah in Luke 1:5-25 offers us many points of reflection on how we can address concerns on the family with the Eucharist as its foundation.

Zechariah belongs to the priestly division of Abijah and Elizabeth is a descendant of Aaron (v. 5). Both of them are righteous and blameless before God (v. 6). Yet they are child-

less (v.7).

a) The commitment of Zechariah and Elizabeth to each other, despite having no child, is exemplary. Jewish law allows divorce to be carried out by the husband if the wife is incapable of procreation. Despite what the law provides, Zechariah did not divorce Elizabeth. He was committed to her. They made God the center of their relationship. May I remind the parents who are with me in this Simbang Gabi: fulfill your marital commitment and make God the center of your relationship.

b) “Do not be afraid Zechariah, for your prayers has been heard!” (v. 13)

Parents who are here, taking good care of your children is a God-given responsibility. Raising children nowadays is not a joke! Let your parenting start with praying.

c) “You will bear a son...he will be great in the sight of the Lord.” (v.15)

Success seems to be the goal of parents as they raise their children. Parents send the children to school, supporting them in their tasks like making choices and decisions, all leading to the intended success of their children in the future. However, the Gospel today serves as a powerful reminder to all parents: the priority of parenting is making your children pleasing in the eyes of the Lord. To be faithful comes first before becoming successful.

CONCLUSION

With all the different styles and scholarly approaches in raising children nowadays, I think the Lucan text on the birth of St. John the Baptist invites us to remember the following:

a) Couples, be truthful to one another. Always remember that the sacrament of Matrimony is a life-long commitment to selfless love. Let the Eucharist be the source of your

strength in your marital journey.

b) Parenting starts with praying. Parenting and faithfulness comes before being successful. Therefore, make all your children pleasing to the Lord. As you teach them, pray for them. Make this as your lifelong commitment.

c) The Eucharist is the highest form of worship. Never miss it! Go to Mass every Sunday as a family.

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Clusters 5 and 6



THE LORD REMEMBERS OUR PRAYER

FOURTH DAY OF THE SIMBANG GABI

INTRODUCTION

The Lord answers and remembers our prayers. But most of the time, we are the ones who forget the reason why we are praying. God answers our prayers in his time and reason. And while we wait for His answers, God is transforming our hearts in order to properly receive his answer.

Do you have a prayer intention that you continuously bring before the Lord since you were a child?

When I was a child, my dad worked abroad as an OFW at Saudi Arabia. Growing without a father beside me, there was a longing in me for his presence especially whenever I see another child with his father. I wanted to have a complete family at home especially during Christmas. And so my prayer as a child was, “Lord pauwiin ninyo na po si Papa.” (Lord, please send papa home.) Time has passed and the same prayer was still with me. Yet, God was seemingly not answering my prayers. Then, after so many decades, my papa decided to settle for good here in the Philippines. I cannot believe what I heard. “Parang ayaw ko pang-maniwala.” To me, this is my first concrete experience in which God has answered my prayer. And His answer came not in my own timing, but in His.

BODY

We have heard the story of two couples in our readings: Zechariah and Elizabeth, Manoah and his wife. They’re both advanced in age and still do not have a child. It is a tragedy

for Jews to be barren. Such tragedies cause them to think that they are cursed by God. Just imagine the anguish of these couples. They felt that God was angry with them and this was their punishment. What made it more painful was the societal stigma – they were the talk of the town. Without fault of their own, people judged them as someone who angered God. Obviously, their prayer was to have a child just to end all this hate and unfounded accusations against them.

Zechariah was a temple priest. It is his obligation to pray on behalf of Israel. As a priest, it can be thought that his wife, Elizabeth, is a devout and pious woman. We can just imagine the content of their prayers – both inside the temple and in their home – “Panginoon, kailan mo kami bibigyan ng anak?” Lord, how long will we wait? When will we have a child?” Both of them are already advanced in age, as the Gospel says. So, can you imagine how long they have been waiting and praying and tolerating all the harsh judgment of their community?

But despite the long wait, the Lord hears and remembers all our prayers. He never forgets a single letter of our prayers.

In this time of pandemic and calamities, we have the same anguish and questions with Zechariah and Elizabeth. “The people are suffering Lord, we are perishing, how long will this pandemic last?” We have many prayers which seem to be unheard by God. “Panginoon, hanggang kailan kami mag durusa?” Lord, how long are we going to suffer? But God is telling us today – your prayer is not in vain. “Hindi nasayang ang iyong mga panalangin” God remembers and God will surely answer. And what can we learn from this?

Firstly, prayer keeps the family together. Zechariah and Elizabeth hoped and prayed for their child. Prayer kept them united - united in God, united in mind, and united in heart. The family that prays together stays together, as venerable Patrick Peyton would say. It is in prayer that the family will

grow in love and care for each other. Prayer promotes the bond of the family and in this time of pandemic, it is beautiful to see families praying the rosary and attending online masses together.

Secondly, prayer transforms our hearts. Zechariah became mute because he did not believe at the message of the angel. But if we come to think of it deeply, his being speechless was not a curse but a blessing, an opportunity to be quiet and to listen to God. God prepares our hearts to be the dwelling place of his graces. He transforms our hearts in prayer, that in one way or another, we will be the answer to our prayers.

Finally, prayer enables us to trust God. Zechariah and Elizabeth trusted God that he will answer their prayers. Prayer “makes us aware that God never ceases to love us and that he answers all our prayer in a way that is best for us.” God definitely hears all our prayers. He wills the best for us. Our Gospel for today teaches us that God grants our prayers. But the “when” of His answer is not always “now.”

CONCLUSION

We are also called to imitate Zechariah and Elizabeth who did not stop in praying but continuously trusted God. They did not abandon their prayers until one day the Angel said to Zechariah do not be afraid; your prayer has been heard.

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Configuration V Seminarian
Diocese of Pasig



FIFTH DAY OF SIMBANG GABI
FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT
 DECEMBER 20, 2020



*“Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son,
 and you shall name him Jesus.”*

READINGS:

2 Samuel 7: 1-5. 8-12. 14, 16

Psalm 89: 2-3. 4-5. 27. 29

Romans 16: 25-27

Luke 1: 26-38

THEME:

“Year of the Parish
 as Communion of
 Communities”

HOMILY GUIDE

FIFTH DAY OF THE SIMBANG GABI

INTRODUCTION

How do our parishes respond to this COVID-19 crisis still in our midst? The COVID-19 crisis has brought to us to this so-called “new normal.” Yet COVID-19 cannot beat the spirit of Christmas the way we celebrated Easter this year while the pandemic is with us. As faith-filled communities it is good to share with one another our different approach in handling this crisis. We are not allowed to gather in a big crowd hence the BECs as a new way of being Church is indeed an appropriate response to the situation. The spirit of communion remains strong despite the threat of Covid, as we are called to be a worshipping community, an evangelizing and serving community.

BODY

During the lockdown where BECs have become our way to distribute Holy communion outside the Mass and also to distribute foodpacks. Other BECs continue to gather and reflect on the Word. Active participation in worship and in common action are inseparably linked indeed. This experience during pandemic contributes a lot to the building up of Basic Ecclesial Communities who are one in prayer, contemplation and action fulfilling the three-fold mission of Jesus as priest, prophet and king.

The First Reading talk about the kingship of David as God’s anointed. He will take charge of the Israelite people whom God has entrusted to him. The Lord too declares that he will make a house for Him. The temple that housed the Ark of the Covenant reminds them of God’s abiding presence among them. Our God is truly a God of communion. The Spirit of love bonds us together as one people.

them. Our God is truly a God of communion. The Spirit of love bonds us together as one people.

In the gospel, God sent forth His Son our Lord Jesus Christ to dwell in the womb of Mary. The Blessed Virgin Mary fulfils what is prefigured in the first reading. She is the new “Ark of the Covenant” in the new era. This too signifies that Jesus is with us, among us being born in the womb of humanity. This become our source of strength that despite the various trials we encounter in our lives as a people, God will never abandon us. As a worshipping community we always foster our communion with Jesus in the celebration of the Word, the Eucharist and the sacraments.

Evangelizing Community

All of us are called to participate in the mission of building up God’s kingdom in our midst. Forming participative communities start from our families and BECs. It is good to realize the continuity of our celebration from the year of the family to the year of the parish. In the family we need to assess whether the culture of silence is still prevalent or are we encouraging each member to participate in the decisions and task being undertaken. Are we forming them to be responsible members of the domestic church? During the lockdown, it highlights really the family as a domestic church. This is one of the relevant messages this pandemic has brought about. We take this as an opportunity to form families who actively and fully participates in the mission.

The late Bishop Claver once wrote that participation is a product of a participative leadership of the pastors and not an authoritative one. With the pastor, religious and laity coming together we need to assess the modern culture and how it is affecting our commitment to the mission as a communion of communities. We believe that no one should be left behind on this matter. Hence PCP II concludes that all

these; communion, participation and mission find expression in BEC's.

Our economy calls for an inclusive economy in this time where no one is left behind. Such call is also true for our parishes. This means that we still have a lot to do in our respective dioceses and parishes. As we sail towards 2021 and beyond we should tap and harness all the various gifts in our community for the constant upbuilding of the church and the on-going transformation of our society giving flesh of the kingdom values.

Constant Catechesis and Formation

Pope Francis conveys a challenge for constant catechesis and formation after this pandemic. He says that the celebration of the sacrament with the physical presence of a congregation should resume after the pandemic. Online masses are helpful at this time of crisis but they should not become a new normal in which our people, especially the youth, will no longer go to church since they have been accustomed to it virtually. This might still be helpful to the sick and elderly nonetheless. We believe that BECs can take up this challenge, letting them experience what it means to be a Church in our day to day living. Formation and catechesis in the parish should be downloaded to BECs.

Serving Community

During the lockdown when people were isolated, one can sense the need for each other. People say that during lockdown "neighbors helping neighbors" is a great stress reliever. Mental health is affected in isolation hence one needs to communicate. Thanks God people still communicates through the modern gadgets, through group chats and others. This makes the person sane while in lockdown. One calls this new mode of community as a "digital community."

Barter trade which was a trademark of a Filipino community before is also revived now thru social media.

Yet the BECs in the neighborhood is highly treasured as it responds to the need for solidarity with one another. This allows their neighborhood beginning with their families, to have physical, and spiritual bonding. Motivated by God's love and filled with the Holy Spirit, the BECs are truly the key to integral human and Christian development.

CONCLUSION

A Time to be Pro-active in the Midst of Threats to Life

We observed that the pandemic has allowed the earth to rest and breathed for awhile wherein pollution has stopped. This implies that our BEC's can be more pro-active in attending to the task of integral ecology. Just as we practice "Dayong" (a Bisayan term of helping one another) in our neighborhoods, helping one another in our needs, this time let us also practice "Dayong" for our common home. Pope Francis successfully inspired us to celebrate the Laudato Si week last May 16-24 and last September during the "Season of Creation." Hopefully this will make us more conscious and be active "Carers of our Common Home" beginning with our BECs. We all realize that the anthropocentrism and consumerism wreak havoc to the environment and may result to more pandemic according to some scientific studies. We should realize that we belong together in the developing, evolving and dynamic story of the universe. Hence our interconnectedness, communion goes beyond us. It cuts across deeply in the whole of creation.

Let us continue to take care of the poor in our midst. They are always at the altar of sacrifice during conflicts and various calamities. Yet from experience the poor can also be

tapped as the agents of their own development. Their simplicity, generosity and capability to change is always there. The readings today featured David and the Blessed Virgin Mary who are poor, yet docile and humble servants of God who has played a great role in our history of salvation. May we also pattern our lives after them and especially the Blessed Mother to intercede for us that we become truly a communion of communities, actively participating in living out the gospel values of Love, Peace and Justice in our land.

Most. Rev. Jose A. Cabantan, D.D.
Archbishop of Cagayan de Oro
Chairman, CBCP Committee on
Basic Ecclesial Communities



OUR LIFE OF COMMUNION TO NURTURE FIFTH DAY OF THE SIMBANG GABI

INTRODUCTION

When did you feel that you truly belong to your parish community? That you are never alone in your life of faith? That you have brothers and sisters who are one with you, in your confidence and hope, in your love and service to the Lord? When did you experience so united with your co-parishioners? Whenever you come to the Holy Mass, do you feel deeply that you are in union with God and with others present in the celebration? How I wish that we who form part of the parish know always in our hearts and minds that we all belong to God and to one another; that even if we are members of different families or of different religious organizations or of different BEC's, we all nonetheless constitute one community of communion in the Lord. Though we are of many small "communities" (families, organizations, BEC's) we form one communion of communities.

BODY

Today's gospel passage (Lk 1:26-38) speaks and reminds us of this wonderful gift of communion, which belongs to us as God's chosen people. It recounts to us God's offer of radical union with with us. By his divine initiative, God asked Mary, one of our own, to bear his own divine Son. With Mary's fiat, God's divine Son became human in her womb. God the Son united himself to us in a totally unexpected way; he in his divinity embraced us in our humanity. He became one of us and God-with-us, the Emmanuel. Truly, God the Son "became "flesh and made his dwelling among us" (Jn 1:14). We can say that the grace of our union, the gift of our communion with God in Christ, began with the story of the Annunciation.

The same gospel passage also recalls to us the origin of our union with each other as God's beloved children. With the grace of our union with God in Christ, we are united with each other in the grace of God. United with Christ, we are consequently united with each other, as his brothers and sisters in the Lord. That shows that the grace of union among us has its beginning too in the same story of the Annunciation. For the child that was to be conceived in Mary's womb was to be called Jesus; he was destined to be the Savior of the world. Indeed, Jesus, the son born of Mary, reconciled and united us—by his incarnation, passion, death and resurrection—not only with God but also with each other.

In sum, the gospel serves to remind and call us as God's people in our respective parish community to cherish and nurture our life of communion with the Lord and with each other. God's Son was born of Mary precisely because he desired to restore this life of communion with him and among us as God's beloved ones. Truly, this communion is God's gift to us. Yet, it is also a responsibility for us to fulfill. Ours is the task to nurture this communion constantly in our families, in our small communities, in our respective parish community as a whole.

Do we know and see that by his loving providence, the Lord too has provided us with ample ways and means of nurturing together our life of communion? Some of these ways and means come easily to mind. To begin with, we share and profess in the Lord one faith, one hope and one love. Where two or three are gathered in His name, Christ is with us and we become one praying community of his (Mt 18: 19-20). Every time, we celebrate together the word of God, the Lord draws and nourishes us closer to Him and to one another. We nurture our life of communion with God and with each other—each time we celebrate the sacraments of reconciliation, the anointing of the sick, the baptism and the confirmation, the Holy Orders and the Matrimony. Indeed, through the

sacred mysteries of the word and the sacrament, the Lord ever builds us into his one living Body; He makes us grow together in our life of communion.

We nurture too our life of communion in every act of charity and compassion that we extend to one another, especially in times of great need and distress. Doubtless, we are called to do this more during this Covid-19 pandemic. Whenever we care for the “least” members of our community, we manifest and grow in our loving union with Christ and in our loving union with his Body. He himself assures us, “Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me” (Mt 25: 40). Lastly but not the least, we demonstrate and cultivate our life of communion each time we unite our minds, hearts and hands together in accomplishing any activity, project, or program for the common good of the parish community or of the human community to which we belong.

Above all, we should never forget this beautiful mystery, that we nurture and express our life of communion in the most real and grace-filled way each time we celebrate together the Holy Eucharist. Indeed, our participation in the one bread and the one cup of the Lord’s thanksgiving is the peak expression, source and summit of our communion with God and with one another.

CONCLUSION

Advent, inclusive of the nine-day Simbang Gabi, is a period of preparation for the Lord’s coming in the mystery of his becoming man, one of us. It is also a time of expectation for the coming of God’s gift of communion, in a manner so near to us, that is, in the human birth of His Only Son among us. This season is the best time in our parish community to renew and nurture our communion with God and with one another, in countless ways, big and small. In this way, we best

prepare ourselves for Christmas as a joyful celebration of God's nearness to us, of our communion with Him and with one another in our families, in our small communities, and in our parish community.

Rev. Fr. Quirico T. Pedregosa, Jr., OP
Rector
University of Santo Tomas - Central Seminary



HOMILY GUIDE

FIFTH DAY OF THE SIMBANG GABI

INTRODUCTION

Can you still remember all the visions we had for 2020? Dreams we dreamt together for our parishes and communities? We were hopeful and enthusiastic about our plans. Then, the pandemic hit: parishes were closed, public Masses prohibited, church gatherings cancelled. On top of that, many of our brothers and sisters lost businesses, jobs, and livelihood. Many had symptoms, some went to the hospital. Some, sadly, died.

To say that this year has been a horrible year is an understatement. It caught our parishes off guard with numerous surprises. In fact, our hopes and plans went unfulfilled. With all of this, things seem hopeless.

BODY

Our readings for today might be able to shed some light into the odd situation we are experiencing today. The First reading, for instance, taken from the second book of the prophet Samuel narrates the promise of an everlasting Kingdom being given to King David. It was a promise sown and was dearly kept in the minds and hearts of David and of the entire people of Israel. But after several centuries inflicted with numerous defeats in war, an exile to Babylon and being taken over by the Roman Empire, the anticipation for a glorious and abundant kingdom turns into a thing of the past, a broken promise, a hope ought to be laid to rest.

But then a whisper of hope, “Ave Maria” was heard in a humble town of Nazareth to an unassuming woman named

Mary. The Glory that was promised, the coming and the indwelling of the Most High God has finally been fulfilled. The King has come. Love has come.

Our experiences of defeat, of disappointments and uncertainties for the past months is not far from those experienced by the people of Israel. To keep the hope, therefore, is not vain. Our parishes have been able to go through many struggles already, enough to lose sight of the promise and faith in God. This pandemic might have taken away the grandiose plans and noble programs we built for our parishes. Let it not lead us to despair. Let it not take away from us the joyful hope of encountering Jesus.

CONCLUSION

Like Mary, may we still keep the faith and be ready for the coming of the longed awaited promise. Like her, may we allow ourselves to be worthy bearer of the good news to be shared to our neighbor. A prominent philosopher C.G. Jung once expressed that perhaps many of us find it difficult to see God because we fail to look “low enough”. May we show and share Jesus even in our humble and lowly ways.

Rev. Fr. Bob McConaghy
Resident Priest
Lorenzo Mission Institute



CONCEIVE JESUS IN OUR COMMUNITY FIFTH DAY OF THE SIMBANG GABI

INTRODUCTION

During the Pandemic, do we still live as a community? In what way? Is there any sign showing that we are a community or we are not a community? In other words, do you still have this sense of belongingness? Do you still work within a community? Are you happy belongin to a community?

BODY

In the Old Testament, King David wanted to build a house for the Lord, but God said to him: “I have been with you wherever you have gone” (2 Sam. 7:9), then God recalled Israel’s history of salvation. For God, the house is not important. His presence among His people is what is important.

The Gospel today tells us that Mary conceived and bore a son name Jesus. The Word will become flesh and dwell among us. Now we can see how strong God’s desire to be with us. And Jesus also gave us His assurance: “For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.” (Matthew 18 : 20) The last word of Jesus before his ascension: “Behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.” It is Jesus’ desire to be with us and to gather us together as a community in His name.

How about us, do we have a strong desire to be with God and with others? There is a story: An anthropologist who is studying the habits and customs of an African tribe proposed a game to children in the tribe. He put a basket of fruits and candies near a tree and told the children whoever got there first won the sweet fruits and all the candies. When he told them to run, they all took each others hands and ran together. Then sat together enjoying their treats. When he

asked them why they had to run together like that as one could have had all the fruits for himself, they said, “Ubuntu, how can one of us be happy when others are sad” Ubuntu, in the Xhosa culture means: “I am because we are.”

We are the one with others. For “God did not create man a solitary being.”(CCC383) And “we are made for each other.”(CCC372) “No man is an island.” We are not self-sufficient, we need each other. Especially we need to conceive Jesus in our community. We share Jesus’ life in community. We are formed by Jesus to take care of each other. Now, we have to ask ourselves what hinders and breaks up our bond forgetting the will of God to be a community? Therefore we should not like be our ancestors who disobeyed the will of God.

As Jesus’ community, we are bond with each other to do the will of God together. In the Gospel, the Word made flesh and salvation came upon us because of Mary’s Fiat. Hence we received Emmanuel and the love of God. Now we have to ask ourselves what is the most challenge in our community which can break up our bond and forget the will of God if we want to build up our community. Is it individualism? I think so. Individualism drives the one to be interested in one’s own purpose, will and benefit. It makes Jesus’ community lose the nature and identity. Therefore, we do not like our ancestor Adam and Eve to disobey the will of God even though they were together. Let us allow the will of God to take place and His love be experienced here in the earth. It is to be noted “if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfect in us.”(1John 4:12) For there is nothing can stop us to approach other and to be with other in this trying time just as nothing can stop Jesus to be with us.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, it is only in Jesus' community where we find God and the perfect ourselves. I am because we are.

Mr. Sam Nie
Theology IV Seminarian
Lorenzo Mission Institute



SIXTH DAY OF SIMBANG GABI

DECEMBER 21, 2020



“Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled.”

READINGS:

Song of Songs. 2: 8-14
 or Zephaniah 3: 14-18
 Psalm 33: 2-3. 11-12. 20-21
 Luke 1: 39-45

THEME:

“Year of the Clergy
 and the Religious”

HOMILY GUIDE

SIXTH DAY OF THE SIMBANG GABI

INTRODUCTION

As we prepare for the 500th anniversary of the coming of Christianity to our shores, we turn our attention to that group which actively contributed to the spread and flowering of the Catholic faith in our country, the priests and the religious. The priests are most active in the ministry of worship, preaching the Good News and shepherding God's flock, while the religious give witness to the presence of Christ in whatever apostolate they are engaged in.

The priesthood as well as the religious life is a call. The initiative comes from God who in various ways attracts the person to a certain way of life dedicated to the service of God's people. It is not a mere career; rather it takes hold of the entire life of the one called. The center of attention is God himself who makes the person feel appreciated and loved. In turn, that person seeking more of that experience, responds in love.

BODY

Love in an act of the will. The First Letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians chapter 12 describes love not as feelings but as attitudes and actions. It is true that men and women have strong feelings of attraction in all forms but as soon as they exchange their marriage vows, they commit: "to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part." In the profession of the religious vows, the candidate resolves to unite herself more closely to God, to live the evangelical

counsels, to keep the rules of the community and to spend her life in generous service of God's people. Priests in their ordination promise to exercise the ministry of the word, to celebrate the Eucharist and the sacraments, and to take care of the flock entrusted to them by Jesus. All of these are commitments in the name of love.

In the First Reading from the Song of Solomon, the lover "is peering through the lattice inviting, "Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, and come along." God is like a lover, he calls and attracts someone to something beautiful. Since God created our hearts, he moves our hearts to him through different ways: sometimes through a selfless service of a priest or a sister, the beauty of teaching children or the warm affection of a sister to a sick and abandoned beggar rescued from the street.

Love is service. In the Gospel, Mary knew that her cousin Elizabeth was pregnant. She needs assistance. She went there to serve. Joy enveloped the meeting of the two grace-filled women. Even the child in Elizabeth's womb joined in that happy moment. And where is that joy coming from? The words of the Responsorial Psalm provide us the answer: "For our heart rejoices in Him, because we trust in his Holy name."

CONCLUSION

Priestly and Religious life is a call, it is a response of commitment and it gives joy to the priest and religious and to those whose life they touch.

Most. Rev. Buenaventura M. Famadico, D.D.
Bishop of San Pablo
Chairman, Episcopal Commission on Clergy



SMALL THINGS MATTER

SIXTH DAY OF THE SIMBANG GABI

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed the course of our daily routine. Today's world is not the same as it was ten months ago. We cannot embrace one another anymore. Shaking hands has become a taboo. Somehow, we lost the warmth of face-to-face relationship. This pandemic affected almost all aspects of our lives. We were led to the edge of our resources. And whenever resources are depleting, the instinct of self-preservation kicks in. However, the readings on this sixth day of the Simbang Gabi offers an alternative to such instinct.

BODY

It is said that, "We were created by Love, in love, and for love." The two readings for today speak about love. The first reading talks about love in a metaphorical sense while the Gospel in a literal sense. We can talk about love all day but at the end of it, love is measured not in its articulateness but in its actuality.

The First Reading, from the Song of Songs, presents to us a love poem where two lovers express their strong desire for one another. There is this constant seeking and finding of the lover for his beloved. Love poetry is one of the images used in the Biblical tradition to portray God's relationship with his people. The lover and the beloved in the reading evokes the image of God's unfailing love for his chosen people, Israel, and eventually, the image of Christ's love for His Church, the new Israel. St. Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians, that the

husband's love for his wife is a symbol of Christ's love for his Church (Eph 5:25-33). In other words, whenever we speak of love, we cannot but speak of God for He is love (cf. 1 John 8).

However, love in words is never enough. As the first letter of John says, "Children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth." (1 Jn 3:18) The example of Mary in the Gospel speaks eloquently of such love. The angel Gabriel visited her, telling her that she would bear a child. It is but natural for her to stay home and take care of herself. But she did not think only of herself. She knew that her cousin Elizabeth was at an advance stage of her pregnancy and needed assistance. When Mary arrived, Elizabeth was filled with joy and offered homage to her and to the child that she bears. Mary did not think twice and went in haste to Elizabeth and stayed with her for three months. Such an unselfish woman!

CONCLUSION

Whenever we experience love, we cannot but share that love to others. The depth of that love is tested whenever we are placed in a difficult situation. Although this pandemic has prevented us from visiting people physically, technology gave us with the capacity to visit people virtually. A simple, "How are you?" means a lot to a person experiencing loneliness or depression. Small things matter. Like Mary, may we be instruments of God's love and joy to other people in our own little ways.

Rev. Fr. Emilio A. Ascaño, LRMS
School Director
RCAMES Cluster 2



THE LENS OF FAITH

SIXTH DAY OF THE SIMBANG GABI

INTRODUCTION

A blind boy sat on the steps of a building with a hat by his feet. He held up a sign which said: I AM BLIND, PLEASE HELP. There were only a few coins in the hat. A man was walking by. He took some coins from his pocket and dropped them into the hat. And then, he took the sign, turned it around, and wrote some words. He then put the sign back so that everyone who passes by will see the new words.

Many people then began dropping more coins. That afternoon, the man who had changed the sign came to see how things were. The boy recognized his footsteps and asked, “Were you the one who changed my sign this morning? What did you write?”

The man said, “I only wrote the truth. I said what you said but in a DIFFERENT way.” What he had written was: ‘Today is a beautiful day and I can’t see it!’

BODY

In today’s Gospel we have seen how Mary became a bearer of good news especially to her cousin Elizabeth who was experiencing anxiety because of her situation, being pregnant in her old age and having a husband who cannot speak because of his vision of an angel in the temple. It seems that Zechariah and Elizabeth are living a miserable life.

Let us try to reflect on Elizabeth’s perspective having

these instances or situations. We can say that it is a unique experience that made her anxious. Despite all these things, like Mary, she is a woman of faith. She has the lens of faith in her situations and in all things, experiences or problems, “laging ipinagpapasa Diyos at nanampalataya”. Everything she does, her perspective is always anchored to the will of God, that is why she also look at things with the lens of faith. Just like in the story of the blind man, we need to change our own perspective despite what we are experiencing. Elizabeth look at things, with the lens of faith. That is her perspective on the situation she had.

Today, we also have a unique and different situation compare to what we were used before. We are experiencing a great crisis that affects everyone of us that makes us anxious, that creates anxiety in every lives of an individual. Many have died and many lives are still in danger. Experiencing all these things, what is our own perception? Do we blame God for these things? Or we look at these things as ways and means to become closer to God, a way that teaches us to call and hold on to God, that God at the end of the day is the only one who can save us, like Elizabeth, she looked at things with the lens of faith.

CONCLUSION

Today we are invited to change our own perspective and look at things with the lens of faith like Elizabeth. We are reminded of three things:

1. Believe: Nothing is impossible with God. Elizabeth showed she was hopeful about their future. She believed that good things would happen, and so it happened. God takes away her reproach, “iniahon sa kadustaan”, even at her old age God blessed them with a son. Indeed, nothing is impossible with God.

2. Trust. Elizabeth showed how merciful God is, that God would never leave us, “mag TIWALA lang sa DIYOS”.

3. Obedience. Elizabeth took courage to stand firm and obey God, without complain and blaming God for the difficult situations she experienced and evidently, she was blessed by God.

The Gospel today is inviting us to be like Elizabeth, having a positive perspective in every situation we have, whether in difficulties, trials or problems, we should look at things with the lens of faith. In order for us to have this faith, we need to believe, trust and obey God, for in God, nothing is impossible.

Mr. Sherwin N. Balmores
Configuration V Seminarian
Diocese of Tarlac



SEVENTH DAY OF SIMBANG GABI

DECEMBER 22, 2020



*"The Almighty has done great things for me
and holy is his name."*

READINGS:

1 Samuel 1: 24-28

1 Samuel 2: 1. 4-5. 6-7. 8

Luke 1: 46-56

THEME:

"Year of the Youth"

MAGNIFICAT: GOD HAS DONE GREAT THINGS FOR ME SEVENTH DAY OF THE SIMBANG GABI

INTRODUCTION

Somebody forwarded to me a link to a commercial on YouTube entitled: 'Coca Cola Christmas Commercial 2020'. It is about a girl who sent a letter to Santa Claus through her father. The father leaving for work on an oil ridge –a far and dangerous work. One day after a day's work, the father saw the letter and remembered her daughter's request. So he travelled to the North Pole, crossing seas, mountains, etc.; braving rains, storms, heat and snow. When he finally arrived at the house of Santa Claus in the North Pole, a note was posted on the door which said: 'Closed for Christmas'. Santa was not home and he could not deliver his daughter's letter. As he stood outside Santa's house, a big truck suddenly came by, and the door open signaling an offer for a ride. The father rode the truck which brought him home. At home, he opened the undelivered letter. He saw what was written, it says: "Dear Santa, Please bring Daddy home."

After watching this, another commercial immediately followed. The title made me curious: "The Last Customer". So I viewed the commercial. It featured three young people: Carla -a gift wrapping clerk, Lester -a grocery bagger and Jerico -a waiter. They were young people who were extending their hours of service while everybody was enjoying the Christmas holidays. While they dreamt of spending the happiest days with their family and loved ones, they had no choice but to work for their family. As they watched people and families happily having their gifts wrapped, doing shopping for the holidays, eating together at a restaurant –they longed doing the same things for their loved ones. The commercial ended with Carla receiving the last gifts she was

wrapping; Lester given the last set of good he packed; and Jerico receiving as treat for him and his family the last set of goods ordered from him.

These two commercials feature young people's dreams and hopes. A close examination of the dreams and hopes of these and many other young people will show that their dreams are not simply for their own. Most of the time, when a child is asked about what he or she hopes to be when he/she grows up, answers would be: 'I want to be a lawyer to defend the poor.' 'I want to be a doctor to help the needy.' 'I want to work to help my Mama.'

It is amazing to realize how the dreams of young people are directed towards others.

While this is so, however, it is also sad that there are young people who have lost their dreams. Poverty and suffering have stolen them of their dreams. The situation has been aggravated by the pandemic, natural calamities and tragedies that recently came our way. Many have lost their dreams, even their idealism. The increase in the cases of young people committing suicide or getting depressed is bothersome.

Years ago, as a young priest, I remember listening to Cardinal Chito Tagle speaking about the youth, he was saying: 'Let us teach the young to dream once again. Ang iba sa kanila nawalan na ng pangarap. Kapag nawalan tayo ng pangarap, para na tayong namatay. Nakalulungkot na ang pangarap na lamang ng ibang kabataan ay magkaroon ng cell-phone, ng gadget, etc.'

Indeed, where have our dreams for society, for the poor, for our country gone? Has idealism disappeared? Have we lost all our hopes?

BODY

Mary's Dream and God's Dream

In today's gospel, the Song of Mary, called Magnificat is about the dream of the poor ones of God, the anawim. The Magnificat is also about Israel's dream of a Savior who will free them from slavery. Isn't it our dream too –to be freed from pain, suffering, violence, poverty?

The Magnificat is not only the dream of a people, but it is also about 'God's dream and promise.' Remember in Genesis, after the fall of our first parents, God said: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." (Gen 3:15) This is called the proto-evangelium, the first gospel about the promise of a Savior.

The Magnificat is not only about a dream, but the fulfillment of the a dream and a promise. These are expressed in Mary's words:

*My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for He has looked with favor on His humble servant.
From this day all generations will call me blessed,
the Almighty has done great things for me,
and holy is His Name. (Cf. Luke 1:46-56)*

The Magnificat is about God's promise of freeing us from captivity and slavery; from the bondage of sin and evil. Mary testifies to this:

*He has mercy on those who fear Him
in every generation.
He has shown the strength of his arm,
He has scattered the proud in their conceit.
He has cast down the mighty from their thrones,*

*and has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich He has sent away empty.*

God overturns the situation. He fulfills the dream of the little ones, the poor ones, as he scatters the proud in their conceit and casts the mighty from their thrones.

2021: Missio ad Gentes

After successive calamities that befell us, aggravated by the Covid pandemic, we ask: what can we hope for? Perhaps our dreams have been dashed by the tragedies and misfortunes of 2020. Do we still look forward to a bright future?

Mary tells us about God's fidelity. God is and has always been true to his word. He fulfills his promises. We can count on God. In fact, the birth of Jesus is God coming to us in the flesh, to redeem us and to show us how we can rise once again with him. With Jesus' birth, hope dawns. Mary is the morning star that signals the light, our redemption. "The almighty has done great things for me", she declares in this song.

As we celebrate the 500th year of the arrival of Christianity, we may recall that the voyages and discoveries were sparked by big dreams, both secular and spiritual dreams. Such is the power of a dream. Dreams can provide us a map and energy for to build the future.

Thus, we remind all, especially the young: 'do not let go of your dreams and your idealism. Your dreams and aspirations will propel you to the future, as the dream and the promise of a Savior, sustained the People of Israel in many and very difficult situations.'

The quincentennial celebration is a reminder for us of God's dream of the building up of the Kingdom. We recall the words of Jesus to his disciples: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, even to the end of the age". (Matthew: 28:19-20)

The missions and the early missionaries were spurred on by God's dream. Therefore, the arrival of Christianity, signaled for us the reception of God's dream for his people. 500 years ago, the seeds of this dream were planted by the first missionaries on our land and shores.

The Youth and God's Dream

It is characteristic of the young to dream. And we must teach them to dream once again. We need to initiate them into 'God's dream' –the Kingdom of God on earth, that is: a world, a community, a family that grows in truth and in love; where there is justice, compassion and peace; in progress yet in solidarity with each one.

Yet, we need to tell them and ourselves that we should not simply stay in our dreams. But to do what is within our power and influence, while relying on God's grace, to realize our dreams and God's dream.

Sadly, many times we remain within the sphere of intentions or promise. A Spanish dictum says: 'Del dicho al hecho hay mucho trecho'. ('From what is said to what is done, there is a great distance.') We need to bridge the gap between intention and action. When ones word does not match with ones actions, that is duplicity and incoherence. Integrity, on

the other hand is the congruence with what is said and what is done.

God is true to his promise. He acts on his word. The first readings also recounts that God fulfilled the dream of Elkanah and Hannah for a child. (Cf. 1 Samuel 1:24-28) Young Samuel is the fulfillment of their prayer. Hannah named the child Samuel, saying, "Because I asked the Lord for him." God brings to fulfillment.

Mary exclaims:

*He has come to the help of His servant Israel
for He has remembered his promise of mercy,
the promise He made to our fathers,
to Abraham and his children for ever.*

CONCLUSION

Christmas, in truth, is the fulfillment of God's dream –of a promise and the longing of his people, Israel.

The year of mission prods us to go into the deep. To engage in mission is to be part of the fulfillment of God's dream. Missio ad gentes (mission towards peoples) is to bring the hope and love of God to peoples.

Many of us will not be sent to far mission territories. Yet, there are many among us who need to hear the Good News of God's saving love. They are within our homes, they are among our friends, they are poor neighbors who have lost hope in the society, the government and the church.

Let not our dreams be dashed by the tragedies that befall us. In the face of Covid and the many tragedies that come our way, let us hold on to our dreams and God's dream for us. God fulfills his word, as Mary has attested to. May we also fulfill dreams and help others realize their dreams. The

young people in the commercial ads earlier mentioned have reason to sing with Mary: “My soul magnifies the Lord, for he has done great things for me.”

Most Rev. Rex Andrew C. Alarcon, D.D.
Bishop of Daet
Chairman - Episcopal Commission on Youth



“A GRATEFUL HEART REMEMBERS...”
SEVENTH DAY OF THE SIMBANG GABI

*Gratitude is borne in hearts that take time to count up
 God's blessings.*

INTRODUCTION

Every one of us had been blessed by God with memories to cherish and experiences to treasure. Some even have photographic retention on how the Lord had been good to them in many ways.

When was the last time you sincerely have expressed your praise and gratitude to God?

When was the last time you have acknowledged God's countless interventions in your community?

BODY

The celebration of the 500 years of Christianity in the history of the Catholic Church in the Philippines, gives us a profound reason to remember and to be grateful for God's bountiful blessings through the centuries. The victories we have experienced, the challenges and struggles we have conquered as God's people, were testaments on how much we have been gifted by God.

Let us count our blessings and give thanks to God without forgetting the dark side of the past and pray for God's forgiveness and healing.

To usher us in remembering with grateful hearts, two notable women figures, Hannah, in the first reading and Mary, in the gospel episode will guide us in this noble journey.

In the first reading, a gift received by Elkanah and Hannah became a gift offered. Hannah, Samuel's mother, had asked the Lord for a child, and when God gave her Samuel, she brought him to the sanctuary in Shiloh to Eli, to offer him to the Lord in a spirit of thanksgiving. Hannah did not only know how to beg something from the Lord, but also to thank him. Hannah recognized in her heart that the best response to the blessings she received was to use those blessings for the glory of the Lord. After she had weaned Samuel, she dedicated him to the Lord all his life.

Am I willing to make a return to the Lord for the blessings I have received?

The Catholic Church in the Philippines has survived for 500 years of her existence and has received the gift of faith from the first missionaries. And for many years now as a church gifted with faith, she has also shared her faith through Filipino missionaries all over the world. The gift of faith received has been shared all these years.

In our gospel, Mary, after conceiving Jesus by power of the Holy Spirit, visits Elizabeth. And in her visit, her cousin compliments her because of her profound faith. And in turn, Mary thanked the Lord for the great things He has done to her through the MAGNIFICAT.

This expression of gratitude of Mary in her Magnificat was not only a recognition of her personal blessings, having been chosen and blessed among women. Her debt of gratitude has expanded in her recognition of the many blessings to Israel, her ecclesial community. This communal dimension was a result of her personal testimony in the interventions of God in their history as God's people.

CONCLUSION

Hence, marking the 500 years of Christianity in the Philippines is not just an ecclesial celebration but a celebration of who we are, a people with its identity as one of the only two predominantly Catholic in Asia.

The interventions of God in our history for the 500 years of Christianity in the Philippines have filled the Catholic Church many blessings to be grateful:

1. The Christian faith – a precious gift has taken its roots in every baptized members of the Catholic Church.

2. The two Filipino saints, St. Pedro Calungsod and St. Lorenzo Ruiz were figures of the faith, in their witnessing and missionary zeal.

3. The youth of the church, were counted among the many blessings and treasures of history, the future generation of the church.

May MARY, our mother, continue to guide and inspire the church as we celebrate the 5th centenary of the coming of Christianity in the Philippines. May this be an occasion to remember the past with gratitude and continue to hope with God's interventions to deepen our faith and to sustain our mission.

Rev. Fr. Neil Vincent M. Tacbas
Rector
St. John Paul II Minor Seminary



MY GIFT IS MY SONG

SEVENTH DAY OF THE SIMBANG GABI

INTRODUCTION

As God's people, our own journey of faith challenges us to live a life of witnessing in a way that our lives radiate the love, hope and truth of Christ. But, in these times of crises and despair, where most of us have been affected by this pandemic and many other catastrophes, where many of us are now faithless, becoming hopeless, and even loveless, how can this witnessing be manifested again as we come to celebrate Christmas? How could we now sing the song of Mary – the Magnificat?

BODY

The Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

In preparation for the celebration of the 500th Year of Christianity in the Philippines, the CBCP has declared last year 2019 as the Year of the Youth with the theme: "Filipino Youth in Mission: Beloved, Gifted, Empowered". The church invites and embraces the being of our young people to embark in the mission of witnessing together with their gifts, talents and life-giving opportunities. In the message for the opening of this occasion, our bishops stressed on the challenges that our young people are now facing today including the Christian life, family and communities (mental health, substance abuse, HIV-AIDS, access to education, environmental problems, human trafficking, politics, dialogue with cultures, digital community, etc.) The Blessed Mother is a model for us, especially for our young people, as she herself was called to mission through the Annunciation at a very young age [cf. Lk 1:26-38]. The Magnificat which we just heard a while ago now brings us to the inspiration of Mary

that like her, the Lord continues to call and challenge us. This is God's gift and mission in a song!

Today's readings, especially our Gospel, draw us to the story of Mary where in her lowliness, filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit, proclaims the Magnificat. The Magnificat is both a song of joy and a declaration of hope. It is overflowing with sentiments of thanksgiving and sharing, of pain and gladness despite the misfortunes and sadness God's people experienced as they put their trust in God. After travelling to see her cousin St. Elizabeth, the holy Mother of God could not but express the joy of the Good News she is now carrying and the willingness to assist her cousin St. Elizabeth in the crucial days of her pregnancy. Her song proclaims not only the Incarnate Word, but also the giving birth of a new people, a liberated people, a people whose life will be centered on the promised salvation in the person of Jesus Christ and the expression of joy to be of service to others.

We are invited today to acclaim our own version of Magnificat, where we can tell our stories of faith and struggles, and how God intervenes in the lives of each of us. As God's people, our own journey of faith challenges us to live a life of witnessing in a way that our lives radiate the love, hope and truth of Christ. In such extraordinary times, it is important that we engage together with God's Word and His presence – that we find a real and deep encounter with God. With the pandemic that we are facing, the continuous rising of our fellowmen contracting the virus, with the physical distancing that must be observed, many of our fellowmen are jobless and suffering from mental health issues, our dear young people need to continue their studies in the confines of their own homes and many more consequences of this pandemic not including the many man-made and natural calamities that we experienced this year (typhoons, floods, volcanic eruptions...). Perhaps we are now wondering about God's presence and His will for us. Mary's example as the

perfect Christian is a model for all as she is beloved by God, gifted in many ways, and empowered in every mission that God bestows on her. We turn to God, through the example of Mary, that we may be renewed and be lifted up from our pain and discomfort.

We are also invited, especially our young people, to follow and act just like Mary. Time and again, we are reminded not to be afraid, for we have found favor with God! May her inspiration allow us to respond with a courageous and committed YES, proclaiming with her: “I am the servant of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word” [cf. Lk 1:38]. Let this trying time be the best of time for us to act and to give witness on what we believe. Let our Magnificat be not only a song that only resounds in the ears, but let it be a hymn that echoes in our deeds. Just as Mary who did not hesitate to meet the needs of her cousin Elizabeth, so let us also not hesitate to heed the call to be of service to God’s people. God leads us on what the spirit of Christmas is truly about – LOVE. We can only do this when we put so much love into our hearts. It is only then that we can become instruments of God’s love, gift and blessing to others. Our magnificat of kindness is our gift!

CONCLUSION

There are two things we can draw from our readings today: One, our own gift can be found in our own magnificat – our daily encounters with God in the lives of each of us.

you write your own magnificat? Second, our magnificat is translated into deeds of love by filling so much love first into our heart and only then that when we become instruments of God's love, gift and blessing to others.

Rev. Fr. Nicanor A. Celiano, Jr.
Assistant School Director
RCAMES Clusters 5 and 6



“WITH GRATEFUL HEART AMIDST PANDEMIC” SEVENTH DAY OF THE SIMBANG GABI

INTRODUCTION

“How are you doing?” It’s a common question you might receive during the pandemic. I also asked that same question to reconnect with my former students, friends and relatives. I received mostly positive and pleasant answers. Some expressed their sadness, fears, and uncertainties amidst the pandemic. Others were bored and missed their usual gimmicks, bonding and hangout with their families and friends. A few did not say a word.

The most striking answer I received came from a person who was supposed to start his job in an international cruise ship: “Thank you for asking. I contracted the virus and right now, I am asymptomatic. I am alone and away from my family as I was about to leave the country for my job. Despite these difficulties, I am still thankful to God. I know He will not leave me. I know my family and friends are praying for me!” “THANKFUL TO GOD”...these words kept coming back...

BODY

The first reading prefigures the story of Mary, in the story of Hannah who has “poured out her heart to God” because of the gift of her son, Samuel, whom God has given her despite her barrenness. Our Responsorial Psalm for today joins the prayers of Hannah and Mary, “My heart exults in the Lord, my Saviour.”

Today’s Gospel echoes the gratefulness of the Blessed Virgin Mary as she accepts the central role in the Mystery of the Incarnation of Jesus. Her profound gratefulness to the Lord is clearly expressed in the lines of her song- the Magnificat. She exclaims the goodness of God not just to her but

most importantly to the righteously and lowly people who are waiting for the coming of the Savior. Let us imitate Mary who sings the Magnificat with her whole heart!

Like Mary, we are grateful because of our personal and communal experiences of God's promises. Mary is very aware of the predominant social and political situation during the time that she conceived the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who will turn everything upside down and make things new in favor of those who are lowly and poor. As we sing and reflect on the profound words of the Magnificat, our Blessed Mother Mary would lead us to thank God who is a God of "paradoxes". God will do great things to those who are lowly, hungry, and poor as compared to the proud, powerful, and rich!

The Blessed Virgin Mary reminds us of the mercy of God or "hesed" in Hebrew. God has shown His greatness and faithfulness to His promise to Abraham and his descendants that He will send the Savior of Israel! God's greatness will be forever proclaimed, like Mary's Magnificat, because of the fulfillment of God's love in the person of Jesus Christ, the Emmanuel!

Like Mary, we become grateful if we see our blessedness and humility. It is her very own story, as she exclaimed, "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my savior, For he has looked upon his handmaid's lowliness." We see the greatness of God testified by the life of Mary, and through the merit, she received from Jesus Christ as she bore him in her womb, the One who will save his people from their sins. Thomas Merton in his book *Advent and Christmas* once said, "Mary's highest privilege is her poverty and her greatest glory is that she is most hidden, and the source of all her power is that she is as nothing in the presence of Christ, of God."

CONCLUSION

Despite the challenges of the pandemic, let us ask ourselves, “What am I most grateful to God for?” In what ways would you be grateful to God this Christmas amidst the pandemic?

As we include in our celebration all the young people in the Philippines, let us also be grateful to God for the gift of the vitality, giftedness, and participation among youth not just in our Church’s ministries and apostolates, but also in our nation – building as a whole.

The young people have so many stories to share. These come from their experiences of God’s presence and with their loved ones during the pandemic. They may have been in difficult and challenging situations, but still they have so many things to be grateful for! We are all gathered here with grateful hearts!

Mr. Carmelo V. Pocdol
Configuration IV Seminarian
Diocese of Iligan



EIGHT DAY OF SIMBANG GABI

DECEMBER 23, 2020



*“John is his name...
For surely the hand of the Lord was with him.”*

READINGS:

Malachi 3: 1-4. 23-24
Psalm 25: 4-5. 8-9. 10. 14
Luke 1: 57-66

THEME:

“Year of Ecumenism
and Inter-Religious
Dialogue”

HOMILY GUIDE

EIGHT DAY OF THE SIMBANG GABI

INTRODUCTION

1. Both the Old Testament reading and the Gospel pericope can be considered as “pointers.” The prophecy of Malachi refers to a very interesting figure: God’s messenger who will prepare the way before him, “the messenger of the covenant,” like “the refiner’s fire” or “the fuller’s lye”; he is the “new Elijah” who will reconcile parents and their children and the children with their parents. This prophecy was fulfilled in John the Baptist whose birth is narrated in today’s Gospel. Malachi points to John the Baptist who will preach the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

John the Baptist is the greatest of the prophets, for not only is he to speak about the coming of the Messiah, like what the prophets before him did, but it devolves upon him to point the Messiah out to the people. John points to Jesus. He presents Jesus, “the Lamb of God” (Jn 1:29) who will replace all paschal lambs and sacrifice himself for his brothers and sisters.

Two days before Christmas, the readings intensely remind us that that day points us not to ourselves, our feeling lonely and limited for our inability to celebrate it in our usually lavish and sumptuous way due to the pandemic. Christmas, as we are all called to become, is a pointer to Jesus; it must lead us to the Father’s love in His incarnate Son and we in turn lead others to the same love. We are bearers and messengers of the New Covenant, Jesus himself, which we repeatedly relive in the Eucharist.

BODY

2. John's name reveals how God wants to be known: He is the God of grace and mercy. In Hebrew culture, a name is ought to tell something of the kind of person the bearer of that name is. God promised the patriarchs of old that he would have mercy on humanity. This promise he made to Adam (Gen 3:15), Abraham (Gen 22:18), David (2 Sam 7:12), etc. From all eternity God had planned and decreed that the Word should become incarnate for the salvation of all humanity. As Christ himself put it, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3:16).

The Incarnation and Birth of the Son of God are the greatest historical proof of the unlimited extent of His grace and mercy. And Christmas joy must always be rooted in the experience of being loved and forgiven, a priceless gift (not sold nor put on sale by Lazada or Shopee) that transforms lives and relationships.

3. A "holy fear" came on all in the neighborhood...all who heard of it "pondered in their minds, and wondered, 'what will this child be?'" For they "understood that the hand of the Lord was with him" (Lk 1:65-66 – Christian Community Bible). God gathers together those who would be witnesses of the glory of John the Baptist, those who would speak of and remember his birth. All of them were amazed and felt that God was behind all these events. Their amazement increased their faith. John had not opened his mouth yet but many of his relatives and neighbors had already been led to God's glory by his birth.

True gatherings of families and friends during the Christmas season (although limited by quarantine) should have for their object to celebrate the mercy that God has shown to us.

Without this object, the happiness and delight we share and receive have nothing solid or authentic about them and are simply vain and shallow.

4. In connection with the Year of Ecumenism and Inter-Religious Dialogue (2020), it is most important that we should be sincerely convinced of our own faith and deeply grounded in it before we can fruitfully meet people of a different religious conviction. Based on the abovementioned three points, the following are suggested guidelines for ecumenical and inter-religious encounters:

4.a. First, these dialogues and encounters are not meant to ignore the non-negotiables in our Christian faith as if there were only one religion in the world. In our encounter with other religions, Christians are exhorted to remain firm and faithful to their identity as disciples of and pointers to Jesus Christ to whom they are called to give witness unwaveringly and uncompromisingly.

St. Pope John Paul II was clear and strong about this: “...Jesus does not in fact merely speak ‘in the name of God’ like the prophets, but he is God himself speaking in his Eternal Word made flesh. Here we touch upon the essential point by which Christianity differs from all the other religions, by which man’s search for God has been expressed from earliest times. Christianity has its starting point in the incarnation of the Word. Here, it is not simply a case of man seeking God, but of God who comes in Person to speak to man of himself and to show him the path by which he may be reached.” And the saintly pope never hesitated to say: “Christ is the fulfillment of the yearning of all the world’s religions and, as such, he is their sole and definitive completion” (*Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 6).

4.b. Second, what is the common ground upon which any meaningful encounter with the adherents of other faiths must be based? It should be the acknowledgment and belief

that we look up to the same God, the Creator of heaven and earth.

Cardinal Francis Arinze, the former President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, offers this common foundation: “There is not a separate God for the Christians and another God for the Muslims or the Buddhists. It is the same God who created every human being. Moreover, this God is a provident and merciful God...This God knows each human being by name. No man or woman is just a number before Him. Each is an individual person for whom He has a plan with all its details... God wants each of us to enter into a relationship of love with Him” (“Meeting Other Believers: The Risks and Rewards of Interreligious Dialogue,”79-80).

Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogues must be a celebration of faith in a God who is known for his grace and mercy, tenderness and compassion. He is not a harsh, violent and cruel God. He does not delight in the suffering and destruction of the wicked and unbelievers. He does not order to kill innocent and unknowing victims and promise reward for those who execute their fellow human beings.

When we call one another brothers and sisters in dialogue, we are not engaging in metaphorical language nor indulging in baseless ideological expression. We are stating a reality. And all this applies to every human being, even before we consider to what religion he or she belongs or does not belong.

4.c. And finally, when Christians engage in dialogue with other religions, it should never be their target to proselytize or induce them to convert to our faith through deceit and all forms of pressure. While we should freely speak about what truly matters to us as Christians, especially our love for and devotion to the Triune God and the only Savior, Jesus Christ, this proclamation aims at offering our way of life as the best

explanation of what we believe. Far from being a pretext to dilute or compromise the essence of the Christian faith, engagement in and practice of interreligious dialogue provides an incentive for a Christian to become a better Christian.

CONCLUSION

People of other faiths who see how we care for each other, especially the poor and weak among us, how tenderly we treat even those who do not belong to our Christian faith, our openness and hospitality towards everyone, the respect and compassion we extend to every human being and so on must be graced with the awe and amazement that leads them to see the treasure we hold. This is the measure of success for any interreligious encounter – when they experience God’s love and forgiveness through us as they are led to the conviction that truly the hand of the Lord is with us.

Rev. Fr. Emmanuel I. Cruz, SThD
Rector
Immaculate Conception Major Seminary
Diocese of Malolos



HOMILY GUIDE

EIGHT DAY OF THE SIMBANG GABI

INTRODUCTION

What if today all our names will be John?

In Hebrew, the meaning of the name John is “God is gracious” or “the Lord has been merciful.”

Biblical names can be used to communicate God’s message to His people. If our name now is JOHN then we must tell the world that God is gracious, that God is kind and good to His children. God is merciful to us.

In relation to the Pastoral Priority on Ecumenism and Inter-Religious Dialogue, how can we live God’s graciousness in this time of preparation for the celebration of the 500 years of Christianity in the Philippines?

BODY

Let us not forget this important fact: we live in a pluralistic society. In relation to faith, we are not all Catholics. There is diversity in our religious beliefs. *May iba-ibang paniniwala ang mga Pinoy.* With diversity comes the challenge of unity. *Iba-iba ngunit dapat nagkakaisa.* This is the prayer of Jesus: “that all may be one” (Jn. 17:21). *‘Nawa’y maging isa ang lahat’.*

The essential question now is how can we achieve unity?

Let us imitate the Lord in His Incarnation. This is the true meaning of Christmas.

He became one like us. He lived among us. He shared our pains, our joys, and even our experience of suffering and death. But His incarnation did not end in death.

In His resurrection from the dead, we are all restored us to our original face. The Risen Lord lifted the veil that blurs our vision of who we truly are.

This is another fact: We are all God's children. We are all made in His image and likeness.

How can we live as God's children in relation to our other Christian brethren (ecumenism) and to brethren who belongs to other religions and beliefs (inter-religious dialogue)?

Be a good neighbor (Dialogue of Life).

When it comes to doing good, work with all and work together (Dialogue of Action).

When it comes to differences in doctrines and beliefs, do not waste your time quarrelling with one another. Let the experts (like theologians) and specialists resolve this in charity and respectful dialogue (Dialogue of Theological Experience).

When together, listen attentively when they share their religious experience. And when it is your turn to speak, share the beauty of our Catholic experience but make sure you give it as a gift wrapped in charity (Dialogue of Religious Experience).

(see CBCP's Pastoral letter: Dialogue Towards Harmony, Year of Ecumenism and Inter-Religious Dialogue, 2020)

When your efforts towards unity fail, accept it as a cross. Do not abandon this cross. Jesus is carrying this cross with us. We do not stop because, like Jesus, it is our very nature to love.

CONCLUSION

Remember, today our name is John. Tayong lahat ay si JUAN, si JUAN DE LA CRUZ! God is gracious! All the time! All the time...God is gracious! Amen.

Rev. Fr. Carlo Magno Marcelo
Director
Institute of Catechetics of the
Archdiocese of Manila



“IN SPITE OF IT ALL, GOD IS GRACIOUS”

EIGHT DAY OF THE SIMBANG GABI

INTRODUCTION

Since the eruption of Taal Volcano, the spread of the Covid19 virus, the consecutive typhoons that relentlessly devastated lives and properties, when was the last time you took a pause and be silent?

BODY

The First Reading mentioned that the Lord will send His messenger... but who will endure the day of his coming? And who can stand when he appears? For he is like the refiner's fire, or like the fuller's lye. At the break of the COVID-19 pandemic the world as we have known it was thrown into chaos, as if lost and have no direction. The things that was held by many so dearly and the values one upholds were suddenly swept by flashfloods. And what most people cling to and cannot let go instantly vanished as if thrown into the dark and turbulent storm. A lot of people lost something these past few months. Livelihood, properties, for some their health, their loved ones, and for others even their very lives. Question of values, principles, and meaning now meet us in this crossroad.

Thankfully, this season of Advent and our Simbang Gabi's offer us through the Readings a lot to reflect on. Maybe like Zechariah, the Lord invites us to be silent, to be still and know that I am God. (Psalm 46:10) As Mother Teresa would put it: "We need to find God, and he cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence. See how nature - trees, flowers, grass- grows in silence; see the stars, the moon, and the sun, how they move in silence... We need silence to be able to touch souls." In silence, Elizabeth understood how God took away her disgrace before others.

It was in silence, that Zechariah realized that God has been gracious – ,according to John.

If these past events have burnt our certainties and swept away our securities, they also reveal to us enduring realities –things that lasts – that we are one regardless of race, color, gender, or religion. This common experience of ours unites us now more than ever. We realized that no one is saved alone; we can only be saved together. (Fratelli Tutti 32) Hence, the invitation to plan and act on how we can be saved together. This opens for us opportunities for dialogue and collaboration. Just like how through the seemingly ordinary birth of a child like John and the inability of Zechariah to speak ushered in the coming of the Messiah, we should also consider one another as having something to offer especially those who are last, least, and lost. No one should be left alone.

CONCLUSION

Advent is the hopeful expectation for the coming of the Lord. Despite everything that have happened, in silence may we see that indeed God is gracious. In silence, may we see that all of us regardless of race, color, gender, or religion are brothers and sisters – a single human family, as fellow travelers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common home –brothers and sisters all. (FT8) In silence we continue to hope that the Dawn from on High would soon break upon us. For in spite of it all God is gracious...

Mr. Jayson R. Resurreccion
Configuration V Seminarian
Apostolic Vicariate of Taytay, Palawan



NINTH DAY OF SIMBANG GABI

DECEMBER 24, 2020



*“Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel,
for he has come to his people and set them free.”*

READINGS:

2 Samuel 7: 1-5, 8-12, 14, 16

Psalms 89: 2-3, 4-5, 27, 29

Luke 1: 67-79

THEME:

“Missio ad Gentes”

ON CELEBRATION AND SHARING OUR FAITH NINTH DAY OF THE SIMBANG GABI

INTRODUCTION

I was still a seminarian when the 1986 People Power took place. Looking back, I can still remember that on the eve of February 25 a good number of us seminarians from my community were at EDSA when we heard a desperate plea aired on Radio Veritas for priests and seminarians to proceed to Malacañang Palace to avert any possible bloodshed. The people were already too eager to storm the presidential palace even amidst heavily armed military men guarding the area. We heeded the call and rushed immediately to the place and upon arrival we could immediately feel the tension running high between the protesters and the soldiers who were in full battle gear positioned in front of the palace gate with the two groups separated only by steel barriers wrapped heavily with barbed wires.

When one of the priests who were ahead of us to arrive saw us, he straightaway instructed us to position ourselves in front of the protesters to serve as their shield. “We do not want any bloodshed to happen,” he said, “but the situation is very volatile so be ready to die in case the soldiers will shoot us. We have to protect the civilians at any cost.” He said it while facing the soldiers with their guns aimed at us. No sooner after we locked arms to act as human shield from any possible violence that a helicopter ascended from the lawn of Malacañang Palace. Then, the news of President Marcos and his family fleeing immediately ensued. The tense-filled and highly charged atmosphere suddenly transposed into a moment of joyful celebration. There was pandemonium as people were singing, dancing and shouting on the street expressing joy in celebration of the newly found freedom and liberation.

BODY

Singing a Song of Gratitude.

In our gospel reading we hear the story of Zechariah who sings a song of joy and gratitude. Why not? For months he could not speak as a result of his unbelief to the angel's message and now his speech has been restored; thus, he has enough reason to be happy and celebrate. But more than that, Zechariah like every Jew was expecting for the coming of the Messiah as promised by God in past ages in order to provide them a "home of their own so they can live in peace and wicked people will no longer oppress or harass them anymore" (cf. 2 Samuel 7:10). And now he has seen how God's promise has slowly been unfolding. What he did not expect to happen though is that his simple desire for a child even at the twilight years of his life would be part of the fulfillment of that promise. For in a mysterious way God has been so gracious to him by giving him a child who would "go before the Lord to prepare the straight path for him" (Lk 1:76). Thus, Zechariah sings the Benedictus to express his joy and gratitude because the Lord has "visited and ransomed his people" (Lk 1:68) and "remembered the covenant he made" (Lk 1:72); he is now a witness of the fulfillment of God's promise of liberation and salvation.

A Challenge to Mission.

Like Zechariah in our gospel reading we are also in a celebratory mood as we prepare for the 5th centenary of the coming of Christianity to our beloved land in 2021. In fact, we are making a nine-year of thematic preparations for this historic event in which we are now on our final year with the theme "Missio Ad Gentes." The Year of Missio Ad Gentes is a good opportunity for us to look back with joy and gratitude for the precious gift that our forefathers received from the missionaries who came to our land 500 years ago. Yes, while

systematic evangelization in the Philippines happened only in 1565, the seed of the faith was already planted when the first Mass and first baptism took place in 1521. Thus, we will celebrate this historic event with a grateful heart!

But we would like to go farther from simply celebrating a milestone; we also want to take the occasion to renew our commitment to mission which is “paradigmatic for all the Church’s activity” (EG# 15). It is in this light that the scriptural theme chosen for this jubilee year of our Christian faith is: “What you have received as a gift, give as a gift” (Mt 10:8). Simply put, it means that we are gifted to give the faith we received, a commitment that requires authentic conversion. Our desire to fan the flame of missionary commitment coincides perfectly to the challenge of Pope Francis not to be satisfied with the status quo of mere administration but to be “permanently in a state of mission” (EG#25). It is a challenge for us to go out from our comfort zones and reach out to those in need to hear and receive the good news.

Related to it is the fact that it is no mere accident that God has chosen our country to be among the first in the Asian continent to receive the Christian faith. God must have planned it that way because he has a mission for us to fulfill. He wants us to be the “light of the world” and “salt of the earth” (cf. Mt. 5: 13-14); thus, it is no mere accident as well that Filipinos are all over the world who in their own way give a life of Christian witness in their new given milieu.

CONCLUSION

Our mass for today is the last day of our nine-day Simbang Gabi and in a little while we will already prepare for the celebration of Christmas. Although this year’s Christmas celebration may be subdued because of the effects of the novel corona virus and the successive typhoons that hit our country, let us not lose sight of the fact that it is Jesus who is the

for our celebration, in the manner that he is also the reason for Zechariah to sing the Benedictus and for us to celebrate the 500YOC in 2021. Let us, therefore, treasure the presence of Jesus in our midst and be ready to share our faith-experience of him to others!

Most. Rev. Socrates C. Mesiona, D.D.
Apostolic Vicar of Puerto Prinsesa, Palawan
Chariman, Episcopal Commission on Mission



ALL ABOARD THE LRT

NINTH DAY OF THE SIMBANG GABI

INTRODUCTION

When COVID-19 did not yet hit the Philippines, many opt to take the Light Rail Transit also known as LRT (notwithstanding the MRT of course). This transit has the shades of lights and shadows.

Shadows. A friend once said, “You have to make sure that if you take the LRT, you shower, spray cologne, and bring a lots of patience and wit — if you do all this, you will survive!” There are incidents that train or railway go through either mechanical trouble or unexpected accidents. This transit is also notorious for the long que of people waiting to be boarded; and of course, it is always crowded! Station after station, the train became more crowded. Every wagon is like you are being pushed through a can of sardines. Taking this into consideration, one must have a tight grasp to one’s bag, since the space between you and other passengers is almost nonexistent that you could feel and smell the pungent sweat and breath of others. “Huh?!”

Lights. Undesirable comments about LRT will always be there. Nevertheless, many still patronize the transit because of its advantages. This is still the cheapest and fastest ways of getting you from point A to B in Metro Manila since most roads are jammed with cars! To add on the beauty are the locations of the stations that are strategically positioned. They are nearer from the metro’s tourist spots and landmarks. They are just within a few steps; or at the most a short ride using other trademark transportations of Manila, like the jeepney, tricycle or even the age-old calesa.

The LRT, with its lights and shadows, is like the nine-day-novena of Christmas. It speaks of a journey that reaches in some way the desired destination.

Today is December 24; and the early morning of this day is considered the last observance of Misa de Aguinaldo. As we await and about to celebrate the birth of our Messiah, we reflect about our journey like the LRT. Have we onboarded the LRT of life? LRT not only the transit per se but the acronym L. R. T. It means Listen, Response, and Thanksgiving.

BODY

Listen.

The Misa de Aguinaldo is a reminder for all of us not just to complete the nine days. We are first invited to listen to God. Listening is acknowledging the nature of God; and claiming the fulfillment of his promise. Five days ago, we heard the Gospel about Zechariah who doubted the message of God through an angel. He cannot bring himself to believe the extraordinary news taking into considerations his many credentials: matured, married, a law-keeper, and a temple priest. He was supposedly a man of faith—not doubting the ways of God.

Unfortunately, his response “How shall I know this?” is one of doubt. He hears and acknowledges what Gabriel is proclaiming to him, but he is looking for something to hang his hat on, he wants a little more proof. He then gives his reasoning for doubt by telling Gabriel that he is an “old man” and his wife is “advanced in years.” In other words, he admitted to not “knowing” these words to be true. In the end, he was struck mute for his failure to believe.

Disbelief, like Zechariah’s, still happened today. Many go through the left and right struggles—pandemic, typhoon,

hunger, unemployment, etc. Halt for a moment! In times of uncertainty, this is the period where we have to listen to God more.

Listening to God is letting your mind not to be distracted from worries. If you want to hear Him speak, you must be “quiet” and you must be focused on what He is saying. Remember God’s ways are not man’s ways.

Response.

Faith is alive when it is shown through action. Faith causes change. Faith is the antecedent to action. Faith by itself, if it does not have action, is dead (James 2:17).

Zechariah untied the knot of disbelief. His response was taking care of Elizabeth’s pregnancy and following the command of the angel to name the child “John.” Zechariah realizes the might and graciousness of God. He acknowledges with humility the unfolding new chapter of their being couple.

The most powerful proclamation of the Gospel, like Zechariah, is not only to believe but to make a positive response on the way we live; in the end to go *ad gentes*—that is, “to the nations”. This is after all the theme *Missio ad gentes* is all about. By the virtue of our baptism, we are asked to take into action the mission entrusted to us—“Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Mt 28:19-20).

In January 2016, during the opening mass of 51st Eucharistic Congress in Cebu, Cardinal Charles Maung Bo said in his homily, “In some parts of the world, Catholicism means

Filipino presence. Every migrant working from Philippines is a Paul of Tarsus in more than 120 countries they serve... Ang Pilipino ay nasa lupa. Ang Pilipino ay nasa hangin. Ang Pilipino ay nasa tubig. Nasa lahat ng dako ang dugong Pilipino! For the last five decades, the only place that welcomed our priests, religious and laity with open arms and cared for them is you and the Church in the Philippines.”

Bo’s message echoes the heart and disposition of millions of Filipinos regarding mission despite the sad realities brought by frequent natural disasters and other form of miseries. Bishop Claver, SJ once said that the Philippines has the unpopular title of being the disaster capital of the world, but time and again, Filipinos have proven their resilience and faith.

Thanksgiving.

It is not so difficult to understand what made Zechariah a man of thanksgiving. He is blessed with one of life’s most wonderful gifts: to have a child. Observe any first timer parent about their experience on holding their baby, and you will find them crying with an uncontrollable smile. A first time father once shared, “The first time I saw my first child, a beautiful daughter, I honestly was scared to hold her. I might hurt her. Nevertheless, the first time I hold her in my arms, I didn't want to let her go. I went into super happy mode. I'll never forget the look she gave me. She is an angel.” This father can go on and on in sharing his experience, but in all honesty, you really can't explain that precious moment.

Zechariah and Elizabeth are first timers. Imagine their joy and excitement. Zechariah could not stop himself to let out a spontaneous song of praise. He was so filled with the Holy Spirit that he could not help himself singing with great joy, blessing and thanking God for all that He has done to his family and for His people. Moreover, like many parents, he

“He will go before the Lord to prepare his way. He will give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of sins.” Zechariah is honored and full of gratefulness.

CONCLUSION

Nowadays, even in this time of pandemic, Christmas portrays a season of consumerism by implementing large savings, sales and deals during this time of year. Consumerism “runs” the world during this season. And frankly it's hard to just remove it from our every day lives. Yes, it's OK to purchase items on sale and gift them to yourself and to those whom you love, but a gift does not substitute love and compassion, forgiveness and presence. After all, this is what Christmas is all about.

It would have been easy for Zechariah to turn to anger and despair. He might have said, *“Ngayong matanda na ako, ngayon mo pa lang ako bibigyan ng anak?! Ano ka hilo?! Hindi ko na kayang mag-alaga! Gusto ko nang i-enjoy ang aking pagiging senior citizen!”* But he did not. His life is a roller coaster ride. There are bumps in the road. However, despite of doubt at first, he Listened, and in the end made him to make a positive Response with Thanksgiving. Amen.

Rev. Fr. Ramil D. Tapang, SSP
Parochial Vicar
Our Lady of Sorrows Parish, Pasay City



THE LORD SPEAKS THROUGH THE MUTE AND THE UNHEARD

NINTH DAY OF THE SIMBANG GABI

INTRODUCTION

September 16 is not so significant for some, but for others it signals the start of their Christmas preparations because it marks the start of the 100-day countdown before Christmas. And today is December 24 – the last day of our preparation for Jesus’s arrival. In a few hours, God will truly be with us (Emmanuel) in a form of a very harmless little baby lying in a manger.

2020 is a very unique case for us. We have not started to wait for Jesus on September 16 nor on the First Sunday of Advent. Rather, we have been waiting for him since we got struck by this pandemic. And matters became a notch difficult for all of us and we have been asking ever since, “Lord, kelan ka ba darating. Lord, when will you come for us.”

But later this evening, he will really come to us, in our homes and in our hearts. This is what we have been waiting for, so let us be awake and gladly welcome him upon his arrival.

BODY

We are so blessed today because we have in our Gospel the very first words of a mute man. Going back to our readings in the past few days, we have heard the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth – how Zechariah has doubted the power of God to make his wife pregnant. As a consequence, for his doubt, God made him mute until the birth of his son.

And yesterday, we have heard that upon naming his son, John, Zechariah was able to speak and open his mouth once

again. And his very first words are our Gospel for today.

And what are his first words? “Blessed be, the Lord, the God of Israel!” if we try to be a little bit imaginative about it, we can see Zechariah exclaiming like a madman, “Lord, salamat! Lord, thank you ah! Ikaw ang da best!” First point, gratitude. Zechariah is filled with gratitude and so must we.

Life has been tough for all of us ever since. And COVID19 made life a bit more difficult and no one is exempt for this – the rich and the poor, the young and the old. Let us not forget the past typhoons and calamities that we have experienced last month. It makes us feel that God is angry to us, right? But Zechariah, in our Gospel for today, teaches us despite all the sufferings that we are experiencing right now, gratitude or thank you are still the right words that we need to say to God.

What do we thank Him for? For the extra burden or sufferings? No. We thank Him because of his assured presence in all our sufferings, whether we feel Him or not. Let us try to remember some of our prayers. Sometimes, we ask Him to take away our problems at the moment, but most of the times, we ask Him to simply join us in our sufferings. And later this evening, indeed, He will really join us no matter what we are going through right now. Our Gospel for today is true: “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel; for he has come to his people and set them free.”

One thing worth noting from our Gospel today is that the Lord speaks through the mute/unheard. Zechariah has been a mute for the most part of our novena before Christmas. But it is from the lips of the speechless that the Lord speaks well. Take for example Zechariah who, though mute, was allowed by the Lord to compose a very wonderful canticle of praise to God.

And in the same manner, God speaks well in our present context through the speechless or unheard. We are not referring here to the physically mute. We are referring to those in the liminalities or peripheries. We are referring to those who are “*walang boses o tinanggalan ng boses.*” God has been speaking for so long in their silent outcry. But what have we done? We have given them a deaf ear. We chose to listen to all these Christmas songs but neglected Christ’s voice in the poor, sick, orphans, prisoners, oppressed, mentally ill, etc.

CONCLUSION

We will not be able to welcome wholly Jesus this Christmas if those in the peripheries of our society are not welcome into our lives. Our waiting for Jesus is not a passive waiting. Our waiting for Him is a mission for us – a mission to be one with the suffering of our brothers and sisters, just like how Jesus became a man to be one with our humanity. Let us be keen and sensitive for the Lord speaks through the mute and the unheard.

Mr. Aldwin Ivan M. Gerolao
Configuration V Seminarist
Archdiocese of Manila



VIGIL MASS OF CHRISTMAS

DECEMBER 24, 2020



*“You are to name him Jesus,
because he will save his people from their sins.”*

READINGS:

Isaiah 62: 1-5

Psalm 89: 4-5. 16-17. 27. 29

Acts 13: 16-17, 22-25

Matthew 1: 1-25 or Matthew 1: 18-25

THEME:

“Mission”

MERRY CHRISTMAS!

VIGIL MASS FOR CHRISTMAS

INTRODUCTION

Merry Christmas! Are you having a Merry Christmas this year 2020? There is a saying, “Every day is Christmas” or in Filipino/Tagalog, “Araw-araw ay Pasko”. But if we take a look back on this year, it seems that we have suffered too many challenges and trials up to this day: This Pandemic, sickness/illnesses, typhoons, earthquakes, desolation, bereavement, and other tragedies.

Are you having a Merry Christmas? A lot of people are saying, “2020 is too much!!!”, “How could you, 2020!”, “This year gave us nothing but bad luck, pain, and suffering!”, and other negative comments for this year.

“I can’t wait for this year to end for a new beginning this coming 2021.”

But, is it really 2020’s fault? Is 2020 really the worst year in terms on what they call “malas” or bad luck? And because of these unfortunate events, Christmas should not be merry, should not be happy... There should be no Christmas! How can Christmas be happy? Is it the decorations? The lights? The food? Caroling? But my brothers and sisters, all of these point us on what the true spirit of Christmas really is. Even if you take all of these away, and despite all of this pain that 2020 brought us, there is still a Christmas. And Christmas is merry because Jesus is the true spirit of Christmas.

BODY

How are we going to celebrate Christmas in this time of pandemic?

First, a Child was born in the midst of darkness. When a

person walks in the dark, he is afraid because he is alone, no companion, no one by his side, and cannot see anything. There are many things that can be encountered in the dark, including bad things. Why is it that there's darkness? We all know that it is the opposite of light. Darkness symbolizes sin, a life away from God; loss of hope, despair and weakness. How about you? Is there darkness in your life right now?

Our First Reading is a great consolation for this day, in the midst of darkness, a Child was born and He will guide us. In this time of pandemic, in this life where it seemed full of darkness, how is your relationship with Jesus? Does your relationship with Him deepened? Or did we turn to others for help and guidance?

Second, God appeared and it caused salvation. Where is God in this time of our lives? Too much suffering, various calamities, turmoil, and evil seems to triumph over good. Where is God?! Do you see Him? Looking back in the life of Jesus, He was born during the conquest of the Roman Empire... where there was too much turmoil and suffering. Jesus was born while Mary and Joseph were traveling far away from their hometown, in the midst of darkness at night. Jesus was born where people did not accept nor let them in their houses. Why did God choose that time for Mary to give birth to Him on this world? We may not understand what's in God's mind but this is His way in reminding us that God is with us, we are not alone, because He is our salvation. During this pandemic, God appeared through the faces of our front-liners. During typhoons, storms, volcanic eruptions, and other calamities, God appeared through those people that are helping and giving help. Open your eyes, do you see God?

Third, the Angel's song, Glory to God in the Highest and Peace on Earth. This is what kings and prophets in the old covenant had been waiting for; this is what the children of

light were looking forward to.

When Jesus was born, among the shepherds, it was there when the Good News was first proclaimed, that in the middle of the night, these people were wide awake to watch over their sheep and making sure that their sheep were safe. The shepherds were invited to see Jesus, they were wide awake and ready. During this pandemic, were you just sleeping? Were you just hanging around? With an invitation, you go to the nativity scene and you will see Jesus. Did you hear the invitation? Are you ready to go and see, Jesus? But are you willing to leave your sheep just to be the first one to see Jesus?

CONCLUSION

Is Christmas merry during this time of pandemic? Yes, of course, because despite of everything: In the midst of darkness a Child was born; we see God; and what He brings is Peace. Merry Christmas!

Amen.

Rev. Fr. Glen William Z. Relucio, Ph.D.
 Superintendent
 Diocese of Antipolo
 Catholic Schools Association



“MERRY IS CHRISTMAS”

VIGIL MASS FOR CHRISTMAS

INTRODUCTION

We have all been challenged by the situations we are in: the risk of the pandemic, the menace of the storms that we all have braced in these past months, and all others. We all have our plans. Everyone has a Christmas tradition. Children used to sing carols in the streets every night. Companies have their parties and employees have their bonuses. Malls were filled with people busy with shopping galore. Houses were decorated with all kinds of twinkling lights and ornaments. Churches during dawn masses and Simbang Gabi were filled with parishioners, youth and old alike. Family members used to come home and dine together during the Noche Buena. Tables were plenty. Tonight is supposed to be the merriest night of the year.

Yet all these have changed because of the pandemic we are in and the troubles of the storms that have disturbed us all. Nights have never been darker. Nights have never been colder. And everyone faces upbringings – the nurses and doctors, the sick, those who are in isolation, the OFWs, the prisoners, brethren who lost their homes and their jobs, the hungry, the hopeless, truly we can say that this Christmas can never be as merry as before. Yet we still celebrate tonight. Why?

BODY

First, we have to look at St. Joseph. Jesus was born in a manger and may be crying for the discomfort. The Holy Family had nowhere to go, and had no choice but be locked up in a small uncomfortable space when the night was so cold. And that was the responsibility of St. Joseph as a father. St. Joseph was even afraid, confused and hesitant at first to

be responsible for Mary and Jesus. He could not understand at first what was happening. Yet that was the first Christmas! And it is about Jesus. Joseph was still gazing on the sweet little baby, the source of his peace. He became his peace in his distress and hesitations. Now we ask, can we still celebrate a peaceful Christmas?

Second, we can also see Mary in the Gospel. While she was worrying where to lay her child, she may also be bearing the pain of the reality that she is now a virgin mother – that she has to endure a life she did not expect before. She might have her own dreams, her own goals, but now, she becomes a virgin mother, a situation that is very risky during their times because that could lead her to her death. Yet that was the first Christmas! And it is about Jesus. Mary was still gazing on the sweet little babe, the reason of her hope. He became her hope in her suffering and worries as mother and as a virgin. Now we ask, can we still be hopeful that this Christmas can be merry?

Third, we cannot forget the shepherds and the magi. The shepherds were working overnight tending the sheep. They need to rest yet they still have to work in the field in that dark and cold night. The Magi, who were wise and according to tradition were rich and able, were also looking for directions, they were following the star and searching for the light. Yet they all found Jesus. That was the first Christmas! And it is about Jesus. Both the shepherds and the Magi found themselves adoring the sweet little babe, the source of their light and joy. He became their light and joy in their unrest, in their helplessness. Now we ask, can we still celebrate a joyful

CONCLUSION

Christmas is about Jesus. We may get distracted by what was happening around us. We may be distressed, confused, suffering and burdened in these trying times but Jesus is

given to us. Yet the challenge is to focus on Jesus. Focus on the sweet, little babe in the manger.

Can this Christmas be merry? Our response is, yes, merry is the Christmas! Because Jesus is born for us, to be with us! He is our peace amidst our fears and distress, our hope in these seemingly endless uncertainties, our beacon of light in this perilous, tiring journey, and our joy in this world full of sufferings, sorrow and pain. Tonight, we acclaim, Merry Christmas!

Mr. Eduardo N. Puno III
Configuration V Seminarian
Diocese of Cabanatuan



MASS OF THE
DAY OF CHRISTMAS
 DECEMBER 25, 2020



*“The light shines in the darkness,
 and the darkness has not overcome it.”*

READINGS:

Isaiah 52: 7-10

Psalm 98: 1, 2-3, 3-4, 5-6

Hebrew 1: 1-6

John 1: 1-18 or John 1: 1-5, 9-14

THEME:

“Mission”

THE STORY OF LIGHT

CHRISTMAS DAY

INTRODUCTION

The birth of Jesus was filled with darkness, as prophesied in the Old Testament. That night was so gloomy, full of anguish and contempt. The Israelites were under the oppressive Roman Empire. They were exiles in their own country. Joseph and Mary personally experienced this darkness during the conception of Jesus. They were engaged and set to marry, until Mary was found pregnant. The fear of Mary, the confusion of Joseph and even their difficult travel to Bethlehem. And of course the unusual birth of Jesus in the cold manger. They were all darkness... until the Savior was born... and there was Light.

As early as late March of this year, Christians all over the world have already been thinking about the kind of Christmas it would be this year. No more usual enjoyable parties and carolings. No more big crowds in the shopping centers. And here in the Philippines, the place for the happiest and longest Christmas celebration, would it be a dark and sad Christmas?

The year 2020 which is about to end has been thought to be as the darkest year in our lifetime so far. Apparently everywhere there has been darkness... the large bushfires that raged across Australia, the strong earthquakes that destroyed parts of Mexico, Turkey and Puerto Rico to name some, the flooding in India and Indonesia, the flight crashes in Iran and Pakistan, the massive explosions in Lebanon, the attacks in Afghanistan, the protests and riots in Hong Kong, Thailand and India, the locust swarms and Ebola outbreak in Africa, the hunger in Yemen. And here in the Philippines... the fury of super typhoons that visited us last month, the flood

and earthquakes, the volcano eruptions, the economic crisis, the unjust killings, and together with the entire world, the deadly and paralyzing Covid19 pandemic that claimed so many lives has continually burdened and changed our lives... and today is Christmas once more, is there Light?

BODY

The Birth of Jesus has brought light to the people. That light to which John the Baptist testified in today's gospel reading. The true Light that came to the world. That light that gave hope to dark lives of Israelites. It is the same light that is bringing us hope as we presently experience all the uncertainties of life. So many questions linger in our restless hearts and confused minds. When will all these end? Why despite the advance science and technology, we could not immediately arrest this pandemic? What is missing? Why is there darkness in all our pain and sufferings? What is God doing while we suffer? BUT have we ever realized that God is bringing us message in this darkness (sufferings)? All these questions and confusions, we find answer in Jesus, the Light.

Indeed there is darkness in sufferings, but there is **LIGHT of HOPE** in Jesus. Undeniably, God who never wills sufferings is the same God who permits them. He permits them not to punish us. He allows them but he always draws something good out of them. To name some...

First, in this darkness, God gives us the message that in these uncertainties, there remains to be **certain..** that Jesus, our Light, is our Hope. God takes these moments of darkness to be an opportunity for us to get closer to Him. This darkness leads us to seek God in this world of uncertainties. Have we noticed that during this time of darkness, all the more we long for the light, we seek for God? We pray deeper

and harder for protection, for sustenance, for understanding, even for forgiveness, for hope, and for faith. We have never been this prayerful and for every grace we receive, no matter how small and simple, we become grateful. We find more time with God who missed us and whom we missed.

Second, in this darkness, God gives us the message that amidst these fears, there remains to be **Someone** who is our **strength and source of courage**... that is Jesus, our Light in whom we find peace. During the first months of pandemic, we were so afraid. We confined ourselves in our houses. We were, and perhaps still are, very paranoid of the situation. When someone in the family felt unwell, we immediately thought that he was infected. We panicked, we feared. We were afraid that we would not survive financially. We were so worried how things would take place. We worried about our jobs and studies. We worried about our business and properties. We worried about our family members, relatives and friends in other more affected countries. We felt so insecure! But where are we now, it has been more that nine months since the outbreak of Covid19, we are still here working, studying, striving, breathing. We are still celebrating Christmas. We continue with are lives. We are more courageous and much more we will become because we are more assured that with Jesus, there's nothing to be afraid of. He conquers the darkness with his light. He extinguished our fears. He makes us strong.

Third, in this darkness, God gives us the message that in this complex world, there remains to be the **simple and ordinary** that can bring us **happiness**. Prior to the pandemic, we had been so pre-occupied with jobs, our business, our properties, our status, our appearance. Have we realized that because of this pandemic, we have more time with our loved ones? More time with our parents and children. More time with ourselves. More time with God. We learn to appreciate

the sunlight, the nature, our homes, the food we eat, our memories. We learn to look at the welfare of other people, the beggars we always pass by on our way to office, our maid and helpers, the grab drivers, the water delivery boys, the “manangs” in the market. We become concerned. In this time of darkness and sufferings that we learn to appreciate the simple persons, the ordinary events, the less-privileged whom we neglect and even forget. Are they not because of the Light of Jesus that we are able to see things that we take for granted and able to see them through the eyes of God?

There is darkness in sufferings but there is light in Jesus. There are uncertainties but there is Jesus whose love remains certain. There are fears and anxieties, but Jesus who Himself experienced fear in his earthly life gives us courage. There is complexity but Jesus makes us see and appreciate the simple and ordinary things around us. CS Lewis wrote in *The Problem of Pain*, “God whispers to us in pleasures, speaks in conscience, but shouts in pain. It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”

CONCLUSION

Today is Christmas. Perhaps, much silent than what we used to have. We remember that cold and silent night when Jesus was born. We remember how light has been brought to darkness. We re-tell the Nativity story that has been passed from one generation to another and so on. So beautifully and incidentally, this Christmas, we now have our own story of deliverance from darkness to light. We also tell our stories of how God works in our lives. Truly, it has been a dark 2020 for all of us. We suffered so much. We had been in the dark. But just like the angels in Bethlehem, it is time for us to shout and rejoice... *GLORIA IN EXCELSIS DEO*.

That was the story of Jesus. This is our story. Let us ponder these stories in our hearts and memories and tell them to others over and over again. And that is our **MISSION!**

Rev. Fr. Maxell Lowell C. Aranilla, PhD
School Director
RCAMES Clusters 1 & 7



GIFT OF LIGHT

CHRISTMAS DAY

INTRODUCTION

September has always excited me. Once the Ber-months come, we Filipinos already have Christmas in our sight. We hear again Jose Mari Chan songs, we see houses and parks putting up lanterns and decorations, and of course, one of my favorite sights during these months: Christmas lights.

How can we not love Christmas lights? They shine so brightly as they bring life to the darkness of the night. The cold tone of the night is painted with colors as Christmas lights hang on houses and parks. They bring beauty, warmth, and life.

This year is different as we all know Typhoons ravaged our lands. The Pandemic which claimed many lives in different ways. Children are not allowed to sing Christmas carols. on the street are less decorations. Even less Christmas lights. Some establishments put up decorations, but who can go outside to enjoy the sight of lights without worries brought about by the pandemic.

BODY

Indeed, it is very different. The pandemic brings silence to what used to be months of celebration and joyful sounds. Seemingly, it brings complete darkness, not only to our traditional Christmas customs, but also to our very life. Weeks or months before this day, we could not but ask ourselves therefore, “How will we celebrate Christmas?” Why celebrate? After all that happened this year, why celebrate Christmas? After all the gloom and darkness which this pandemic brought, why celebrate?

Our first reading (Is 52:7-10) brings us into the time when the exiles are at the end of their stay in Babylon. Here, God leads his people back from Babylon to Zion (Is 52, 7-10). The Prophet Isaiah exhorts the people to rejoice as he declares to them the goodness of the Lord. "Break out together in song, O ruin of Jerusalem! For the Lord comforts his people, he redeems Jerusalem." And indeed, God redeemed Jerusalem. But there is still a greater joy and hope which God has given to man. In our second reading, we hear that "in times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he spoke to us through a son (Hb 1:1). The Second reading reminds us of the climax of God's revelation here on earth: the Coming of His Son.

As we now celebrate Christmas, we are reminded why we celebrate it in the first place. We celebrate God's gift of himself to us. Emmanuel! God is with us! And not only are we reminded that He is always with us, His very name reminds us of his mission for coming to us, "Jesus = God saves". God is with us to save us.

Furthermore, the prologue of John shows us the essential glory of Jesus Christ; that truly, He is God. And the Gospel beautifully reminds us, "What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." Who is the true light? Jesus!

We now celebrate because we are reminded, darkness has not totally overcome our lives at all. The Pandemic has not totally overcome our hopes and joys. And because we have The Light with us, we will always have hope, gratitude, and joy in our hearts. "The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. "The Light has always been with us." May this be an assurance that we too shall

overcome, by the Light of Christ, these situations we now experience. The hardships may have forced us to close our eyes in fear and sadness but we only have to open our eyes again, and let the Light shine on us once more. And when one's life is touched by the Light, one cannot but be a light also to others.

Hence, we are called to be “light of the world, salt of the earth.(Mt 5: 13-16)” Let us be like John, who served as such, by testifying to the true Light. Only when one accepts the life of Christ, one becomes light to all. In this time of hardship and challenges, may God's light shine brighter through us. May we be the warmth of God to our brothers and sisters in need. May we all be moved to mission.

CONCLUSION

What have you done for our frontliners? A simple “thank you” can mean a lot. And you can do more! To those were affected by the past typhoons? Donations, given from the heart, will surely light up their faces. To those who lost their family members or friends because of Covid or the Typhoons, what have you done for them? How can you be God's light to them? Or to the people around you? How can you be light to them? Maybe, by observing the protocols (wearing mask, observing proper distance), you can assure them of safety and health.

Be a light to others. Be a gift to others. And together, we will all go through this, guided by the Light.

Yes, the past months have been too difficult. But as we now reflect on God's love for us, we realize that we were never in darkness. We can clearly see that the Light has always shone among us. We may have lost the usual grandeur of Christmas lights. But we never lost THE LIGHT. We

magnitude of Christmas lights. But it also became an opportunity for us to become lights in our own ways to our brothers and sisters. How amazing is that? How beautiful is that? I cannot but remember, therefore, the lines of a tv network's Christmas station ID.

*Kung kailan pinakamadilim
Ang mga tala ay mas nagniningning
Gaano man kakapal ang ulap
Sa likod nito ay may liwanag*

*Ang liwanag na ito
Nasa 'ting lahat
May sinag ang bawat pusong bukas
Sa init ng mga yakap
Maghihilom ang lahat ng sugat*

*Ang nagsindi nitong ilaw
Walang iba kundi ikaw
Salamat sa liwanag mo
Muling magkakakulay ang pasko
Dahil Ikaw Bro, and Star ng Pasko.*

My dear brothers and sisters, God is with us. He, the true Light, will always shine brighter in our lives. Merry Christmas!

Mr. Greg Anthony G. Turqueza
Configuration V Seminarian
Diocese of Bangued



FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY

DECEMBER 27, 2020



*“He was filled with wisdom
and the favour of God was upon him.”*

READINGS:

Sirach 2-7, 12-14

Psalm 128: 1-2. 3. 4-5

Colossians 3: 12-21

Luke 2: 22-40

THEME:

“Mission”

FAMILY AS DOMESTIC CHURCH

FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY

INTRODUCTION

The Jesus was nestled in the arms of Mary and Joseph (Luke 2:40). Jesus dwelt abundantly in them and they were richly blessed (Col 3:16). Mary and Joseph responded generously to each other and towards Jesus. Jesus grew up enjoying the warmth and care of Mary and Joseph who devoutly listened to God and acted on them.

BODY

Mary acknowledged the abundance of God with her YES. By so doing, Mary is likewise abundantly blessed. When Mary pondered on Jesus, she was deeply nourished and her understanding of the MISSION of Jesus allowed her to let go of the primal instinct of a mother and acknowledge in silence the self-offering of Jesus on the Cross.

Joseph stepped up to protect Mary and the child in her womb out of obedience to God. Jesus was the fulfillment of God's revelation and plan of salvation as the son of David, the son of Abraham and the son of Joseph.

Jesus transformed the lives of Mary and Joseph beyond their wildest imagination. The family faced heart-strong each and every challenge with trust and confidence in God.

Jesus was raised by parents who are obedient to God. Jesus honors them by being obedient to them (Sirach 3:5-6)

CONCLUSION

I admonish parents to accept Jesus in their families. Allow Jesus to nourish in you the love of God that you may

be confident in His love. Allow Jesus to strengthen you in the cross that your love may be purified. Allow Jesus to lead you home that you may accompany your children to their rightful dwelling place.

In this pandemic, we have been given the opportunity to grow as a domestic church with parents leading and caring for the family and with children looking up to their parents responsible for the faith life of the family. This pandemic clearly defined the roles of parents.

We pray that parents resolve to become good Christian leaders in the domestic church called the family. As leaders, they are called to listen to the voice of God. To listen well is to set aside our own voice and be silent. To listen well is to wait on the Lord patiently. To listen well is to understand the voice of God according to how God would want the message to come across. To listen well is to pour out our energies to act on the voice of God with diligence and devotion.

We also pray for the children that they may honor and obey their parents as Christian leaders. May you be blessings to your parents and bring forth a strong bond of love in the family.

Most Rev. Roberto O. Gaa, D.D.
Bishop of Novaliches



HOMILY GUIDE

FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY

INTRODUCTION

One of the lessons we learned from this pandemic is to know what is essential and to value it. We learned that money, work, car, or any worldly things are trivial during the lock down. Even if you have lots of money, you cannot buy anything with it, how fancy your car might be you cannot drive it around, you can forego of your work just to be safe and healthy during quarantine. This COVID-19 pandemic made us realize what is truly important. I remembered in one of my zoom encounters with my students, one of them immediately mentioned that his family is the most essential part of his life. It is the one sustaining him in this time. As we have now entered the Christmas season, part of this celebration is the feast of the Holy Family. Our liturgy teaches us that the family is the first thing Jesus formed when he was born together with Mary and Joseph. Family is primarily designed by the Lord. The Lord entered in history through family. However, the identity and even the nature of family is being changed nowadays. Society is losing the true and sacred meaning of family as we find in the bible. There are so many subtle and cunning attacks against family. In his exhortation, St John Paul II made a stern warning about the attacks in modern families due to social media and other factors. He challenged us to remain faithful to Christ's teachings and his church. In my experience in the school, I saw how family affects the life of young people. Whenever there is a problematic student coming to me, my first question is how the relations in the family is. More often than not, many problems of the young are coming from their own families. I firmly believe that if you want to destroy society, destroy the family. It is good that our readings for today reminds us the importance of the family. It also gives us pointers on how to sustain our-

family in these trying times.

BODY

First, Sirach tells us that fidelity to parents is fidelity to Yahweh. Whenever we honor and respect our parents, there are three things being promised to us, our prayers will be heard; sins will be forgiven, and we will live a long life. These same virtues are reiterated in our second reading, wherein St. Paul gave to the Colossians the principle of life in Christ. These virtues are necessary not only in forming the community but most especially living in the family where husbands and wives mutually respect one another, and children obey their parents. This teaching might be traditional and sometimes considered to be obsolete, but they remain essential in sustaining a family. Respect, forgiveness, kindness, and humility are deemed very important even in this modern world. During quarantine, I heard many stories of my students saying how they appreciated their parents and siblings because nobody else will help them but they themselves. They begin to accept each other and become more patient with one another. They prayed the rosary and attended virtual masses together as one family.

Second, sufferings and sacrifices are part of forming a family. In the gospel today, we heard the story of the presentation of Jesus in the temple. Both Mary and Joseph were fulfilling their obligation in the temple. They complied with what the law was asking. But what is important is the encounter with Simeon and Anna who were waiting for their salvation. Mary and Joseph were reminded of the many sufferings they will bear because of this child. This encounter is considered to be one of Mary's sorrows. In spite of this, both were willingly made their sacrifices and embraced the sufferings entailed by the birth of Jesus. They are the holy family, but they are not spared from many difficulties and problems. The holy family had to carry many crosses - from annunciation, Joseph's dream, giving birth in the manger, -

and the flight to Egypt. These numerous sacrifices made their family not only holy but strong. Like Jesus, Mary and Joseph, most families have their share of problems, but what the Gospel is telling us is to follow the example set by the holy family - putting their trust in the Lord.

Last, what kept the Holy Family strong with their many trials is Love. It is the Love of God primarily that sustained the holy Family. Jesus' love for Mary that even dying on the cross never failed to care for his mother by giving her to his beloved disciple. Mary, showing her love for God when she said FIAT, aware of the difficulty of the task. Joseph willingly surrendered everything to manifest his love for God and Mary. Love is also the message of all our readings for today, respecting, honoring, and obeying your parents can only happen when we love them. Love is also the reason why children will take care of their parents when they grow old. However, it is saddening that families are facing many trials nowadays. One of them is time. Family members seldom see or talk to each other. Parents are busy with their work; children are busy with their social media. We no longer spend quality time with our family. We live together under one roof, but we grow distant from each other. If there is one good thing this pandemic has done, it is that family members spend quality time with one another. Spending time with our family is showing them how much you love them. I hope parents, and even children, realize that not spending time with them is hurting them and depriving them much love.

CONCLUSION

Let me end this with an ancient story about St John of the apostles whose feast we celebrate also today. Traditionally, it is known that St John, in his old age retired at Ephesus where he formed his community. Every Sunday, his disciples would carry him inside the church to celebrate the mass. St John will always tell them to love one another. This message had -

been heard by the community for quite a long time until one of the disciples got the courage to ask him why his message was always the same. St John looked at him and said, “because it was the message of the Master to us and when we have done it, it is already enough.” Many families are confronted with many trials today. I hope that like the holy family, we may overcome them by our love for one another and faith in the Lord.

Rev. Fr. Marion Mark C. Munda
School Director
RCAMES Clusters 3 and 4



CHRISTMAS IS HERE!

FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY

INTRODUCTION

I remember this song (words and music by Will Jennings, James Horner, and Mariah Carey) entitled: "Where Are You Christmas." The song goes like this: "*Where are you Christmas Why can't I find you Why have you gone away Where is the laughter You used to bring me Why can't I hear music play My world is changing I'm rearranging Does that mean Christmas changes too Where are you Christmas Do you remember The one you used to know I'm not the same one See what the time's done Is that why you have let me go.*"

Like everything else this year, Christmas 2020 looks very different compared to what we had before. Even before the 'peak' of Christmas season we used to go to the malls to eat, visit friends, gather in reunions and attend Church celebrations in a full packed. Indeed, a typical busiest time of the year.

BODY

Today, is quite different. We are still confined to our respective houses because of the pandemic that has changed the course of our life. No more festive gatherings and events. We are still home bound. While we all see this as extra ordinary, we are still blessed to gather as one family at home; the domestic church!

Everything is reduced inside the very core, the domestic Church which is the family. Inside the premises of the home, our abode - we are celebrating the Feast of the Holy Family. Truly, our families have various ways and creativity on how to live each day journey, but we can gaze today our focus to the model family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph as we *reflect today's Gospel.*

First, we saw that they follow what is prescribed by the -

law that is to present the child Jesus to the lord. We are a culture family centered (**CFC, No. 1010**). Filipinos have traditionally recognized children as a gift from God. We easily accept the family as the privilege place where new human life is generated, welcomed, and cared for. We treasure children as precious gift from God.

And who among us here have not recognized how precious life is? Since the start of the lockdown, families have also started to recognize the blessing of presence of one another. Members of the family became closer and came to realize the value of one another especially during the time where life's fragility came in front. Life is indeed a gift that families have collectively appreciate. One thing that we can learn from the Holy Family.

Second, the child grew in age stature and strength, and was filled with wisdom. The **family is the domestic Church (CCC, No. 1014)**. The church in home-basic unit is the first school of discipleship where we exercise daily Christian virtues of generous self-giving in active charity, mutual forgiveness and obedience in prayer and thanksgiving.

During the series of lockdowns and as the school year started, homes turned out to be literal school. Parents became instant teachers. One thing that the pandemic recovers, that parents are our first teachers, and catechists. It is in the trying time that we learn from one another. Parents are reminded of their tasks of teaching and role modelling. Prayer became part of every household as they gather in silence before their altar. If Jesus grew in strength and wisdom it is also because of the good example of Jesus and Mary.

Third, the grace of God was upon him. As the Holy Father says: "True joy which is experience in the family is not something random and fortuitous. The foundation of joy there is always the presence of God his welcoming, merciful, and patient love for all. We honor our parents as we honor God, parents care and respect for their children from infancy to childhood we must look beyond and be a Christian witness of

the gospel values of justice and protection of human rights to the wider community.” The pandemic scared us to death and brought us insuperable fear. But if there is one great thing which came about it is our constant faith in God. Every family bowed down to Jesus for healing and mercy. For truly, God’s presence can only bring us peace and security.

CONCLUSION

Despite the crisis, the celebration of Christmas goes on. As another song says: “Christ-mas is here Everywhere, oh Christ-mas is here If you care, If there is love in our heart and our minds we will feel like Christmas all the time, oh we feel you child Jesus we know we've found you You'll never fade away The joy of Christ-mas stays here within our families fill each and every heart With love.” For truly, as everyone strives to live the true nature of family Christmas will always be alive. When family prays together and put Jesus at the center, the Emmanuel (God is with us) is always born. When family turns to love as a way of life, God’s Emmanuel is always there. When family builds and lives as one honoring God, the Emmanuel is truly alive. This is the domestic church, and this is our mission! Our mission is to turn every home a church, who prays, who honors God, who loves like its head, Jesus the promise Messiah with blessed Joseph and Mary.

Let us all pray for all the families of the world, especially those, for various reasons, are lacking in peace and harmony especially in this time of the pandemic. Let us continue to entrust them to the protection of the Holy Family of Nazareth. Let us remember that he will always remember his mercy that mercy is no other than God’s greatest gift the Emmanuel – Christ Jesus the Lord. **“Venite adoremus dominum!”**

Br. Tedley T. Villanueva, SSS
Scholastic
Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament



SOLEMNITY OF
MARY, MOTHER OF GOD
JANUARY 01, 2021



*“And Mary kept all these things,
reflecting on them in her heart.”*

READINGS:

Numbers 6:22-27

Psalms 67:2-3, 5, 6, 8

Galatians 4:4-7

Luke 2:16-21

THEME:

“Mission”

GOODBYE AND WELCOME

SOLEMNITY OF MARY, MOTHER OF GOD

INTRODUCTION

Goodbye 2020 and Welcome 2021! For many of us, this is what we are wanting to say for a long time since 2020 began. With the eruption of Taal volcano, the threats of COVID-19 affecting all facets of human life, series of typhoons that bombarded our country, etc. – we just simply want to get rid of 2020 immediately and begin with renewed hope and vigor that 2021 will be ‘good’ to us! Though our life is never the same again after experiencing such calamities and hazards, we keep holding on to our faith that God is in control – He is the Lord of creation – and in His benevolence and omnipotence, He can usher in a better and greater life after all these. Thus, as we welcome this new year, we tap each other’s back and give the following assurances that our liturgical readings and celebration provide for us:

BODY

First, You are blessed!

The first reading speaks about Moses’ prayer of blessing to the Israelites, while the response in the Psalm says: May God bless us in His mercy! This is our greatest wish for this new year of 2021 – MORE BLESSINGS! The way we understand “blessed” is best reflected in the context of the Beatitudes. It does not mean an easy life. It is not being spared from hardships and difficulties. It is not abandoning the cross; but, on the contrary, embracing it faithfully for our Lord Jesus has saved us through it! With Mary as our role model, we expressed this in profound faith whenever we pray: “Hail Mary full of grace the Lord is with you, blessed are

Second, You are mine!

The second reading from the letter of Saint Paul to the Galatians beautifully assures us: “You are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then also an heir, through God.” Any person who faces adversities and tribulations always go back to the family. No matter how much we have offended our family and how undeserving are we of their love because of our shortcomings, it is undeniable that we belong to them and they belong to us. We can always find a sanctuary in their presence! If a human family is naturally like that, how much more with our divine family? It is being made ascertained – we are God’s children and God’s heirs! He is reiterating now, as we begin a new year, “You are mine!” If we will only trust His word just like the Blessed Mother who totally surrendered herself to God when she said: “Behold, the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done to me according to your word”; then there is no room for paralyzing fears and anxieties. If deep down our hearts we believe that God is our “Abba” then we find true security, solace and peace in the midst of turmoil – for we are ‘of God’!

Third, You are sent!

The Gospel today opens with a description that the shepherds upon the instruction of angel Gabriel ‘went in haste to Bethlehem’. 2021 is the Year of Mission (i.e. *Missio ad gentes*) and by virtue of baptism we are asked to renew our commitment to also go to “Bethlehem” in order to meet the Lord and after our encounter with Him we go back immediately to our homes and communities to spread the Good news so that people too may be amazed and glorify God; and for some may be like ‘Mary who kept all these things; reflecting on them in her heart!’ In short, we are not only recipients of God’s blessings and inheritance but more importantly sharers of them! You and I are MISSIONARY! Let us be sent to-

Let us be sent together to give testimony to a world that is despairing, scattered and wounded. Let us be beacons of hope and love to bring about a positive difference!

CONCLUSION

Let Mary be our hope and model in realizing that we are indeed blessed; that we are God's; and that we are sent! May these truths penetrate the core of our being so that as we begin this New Year of 2021, we possess the proper disposition and pursue the right direction to make this year a prosperous and fruitful one. A blessed New Year to all!

Holy Mary, Mother of God...pray for us! Amen.

Rev. Fr. John Rany P. Geraldino
Assistant School Director
RCAMES Clusters 1 & 7



MARY: THE FIRST AND FINEST MISSIONARY

SOLEMNITY OF MARY, MOTHER OF GOD

INTRODUCTION

It is said that behind all stories is a mother's story because it is from hers that ours begin. A mother's loving gaze and guidance are crucial to any child's relationship with the world, with others, with himself/herself, and with God. This holds true with our Catholic doctrine and devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. As our spiritual mother in Christ, Mary leads us to our deepest identity, calling, and destiny—heaven—Jesus.

As we begin today the civil New Year with the celebration of the divine Motherhood of Mary (Theotokos, “God-bearer”), we culminate the Octave of Christmas with the World Day of Peace. As Mother of the Redeemer and Mother of the Church, Mary always accompanies us in our pilgrimage of faith, most especially as we rise up again from the COVID-19 pandemic. Mary's whole life is a missionary journey, a school of charity. This truth is illumined further in the liturgical readings which present Mary as model of receiving and sharing Christ, the “Prince of Peace,” the synthesis of God's blessings. Three important points as we ponder the readings today.

BODY

First, Contemplative Silence. In the Gospel, Luke presents Mary as an unassuming young woman of Nazareth chosen to bear and raise the Son of God. Mary is presented as the “first Christian” who hears the word of God and keeps it (Lk 11:28). With all the anxiety and struggle involved in the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the lack of a place to

stay, the labor in giving birth, but also the visit and the testimony of the shepherds, Mary ruminates in wonder and complete trust.

In our daily life and dealings with one another, we need Mary's active and meditative silence ("pondering" in her heart). Such is not simply self-restraint nor is it being self-absorbed. Rather, it is patient listening and reverent openness to divine mystery and mission; it is gathering the meaning of our experiences, piecing things together as in a mosaic, and gratefully preserving them in memory.

Second, Life-giving Word. The First Reading gives the threefold blessing of priests conferred on the Israelites. This prayer affirms God's solicitude which is concrete, provident, and ever present. Faith and hope in God is not only "informative" telling us who God is; it is "performative" — it brings beatitude and redemption. God's word is life-giving.

Human words can be hollow, can hurt, or fool others. But our words can also heal and give hope. As the carrier of the definitive Word of the Father, Mary teaches us that our greatest message or proclamation is God's mercy (Psalm). God's loving-kindness empowers us to deal with others in honesty and sincerity, humbly seeking in them the truth of Christ and respecting differences, learning from each other, comforting, and correcting them. St. Francis of Assisi reminds us, "Preach the Gospel at all times. Use words only when necessary."

Third, Enduring Presence. In the Second Reading, Paul tells us that it is through the indwelling of the Spirit of the Son that we have been made heirs of heaven and adopted children of the Father. Such dignity is activated and deepened when human beings constantly respond to it in complete freedom and responsibility.

Filled and fully cooperative with the Spirit, Mary makes it possible for us to experience the all-embracing humanity of God. She abides with Jesus from womb to tomb; her utmost fiat, her “Yes” to God, is her *stabat* (“standing by”) at the foot of the Cross and praying together with the disciples in the Upper Room.

CONCLUSION

The self-isolation and social distancing restrictions brought about by the pandemic have changed the sense and doing communion in the Church. Many continue to grapple with the absence of the physical aspects or tactile expressions of our faith—the Church building, the gathering of the community, and the full, active celebration and partaking of sacraments. Some ask: is there really presence even if it is virtual, or without bodily touch or proximity? Many have found creative and ingenious ways to pray together while not being together physically. Livestreamed and televised Masses, online prayer meetings and spiritual conferences, etc., enable participants to experience consolation, solidarity, and belongingness.

While we acknowledge that the virtual initiatives cannot be the “status quo” or substitute to real interpersonal community and sacramental celebration, but a helpful alternative right now, we entrust everything to the grace and mercy of God. As God transcends human and physical barriers and limitations, he is truly present with, in, and among his people, especially the contrite and committed.

Rev. Fr. Angelo Paolo O. Asperer, SSP
 Provincial Counselor,
 Society of St. Paul Philippines-Macau Province



MARY, THE MOTHER OF MISSION

SOLEMNITY OF MARY, MOTHER OF GOD

INTRODUCTION

Who among you here wants to become a doctor, engineer, lawyer, a priest or a “kapwa” when you were still a Child? Who or what are you right now? Did you pursue your dream? What happened to your dreams?

BODY

We are not just celebrating New Year but today, we are also celebrating the solemnity of Mary Mother of God. This solemnity is one of the three Holy Day of Obligations here in The Philippines – December 8 (Immaculate Conception), December 25 (Birth of Jesus) and January 1 (Mary Mother of God).

In Our Gospel, we saw the shepherds who went to Bethlehem in haste. There they found Mary, Joseph and the new born baby. The shepherds started to tell stories about the baby. Hearing all the stories, they were amazed and Mary kept all these things, reflecting them in her heart.

Let us focus our gaze to Mary as the mother of Jesus and model of faith and mission. The first expression or characteristic that we can get from the gospel about Mary is that, Mary is humble. Mary could have been very proud as a mother at that time because of the praises she heard from the shepherds. She could take all the praises and credit to herself as the mother. But she chose to remain silent and kept all these things in her heart. Why? Maybe because, Mary was aware of her role and identity in relation to Jesus. She was true and honest on the words she said to angel Gabriel, “I am the handmaid of the Lord”. Mary knew that it was not

about her but it was all about Jesus. Even though angel Gabriel said that she was blessed among the women, she remained humble and true to her identity.

The second characteristic that we can get from the gospel about Mary is, she knows how to listen. This is very much connected on Mary's humility, because a person who knows how to listen are those persons who humble themselves. Mary was not just listening to the stories of the Shepherds, she was also listening to her feelings - to her very self. Again, the shepherds could be very tempting for her as she heard them telling stories about Jesus. But again, Mary knew how to listen to her feelings and to look what was happening around her. Listening here does not only mean listening to the one who is speaking, but listening also entails to what you feel and what you see.

The third characteristic of Mary that we get from the gospel is, Mary knows how to obey. To listen is to obey. Our listening capacity are useless if we do not know how to obey. You will never know how to obey if you do not know how to listen. To obey and to say yes to God was not that easy for her. It entails her sacrificing and giving her very self – it was not an easy yes for her. But Mary accepted it with whole heart. It was not an instant yes, Mary was not sure but she was courageous and she take the risk.

The three characteristics of Mary are important elements in being a missionary disciple of Jesus to ourselves and to our neighbors. We need to be humble and not be so proud or boastful on our achievements, status in life, intelligence or strengths, because all these things are temporary. Be thankful on the things you have and share it with others because time will come that you will be needing also the help of others. We need also to learn how to listen. To listen not only to those who are speaking in front of us but also on what we

see and feel. Lastly, we need to obey. Obeying entails listening. We are just wasting our capacity to listen if we do not know how to obey. You cannot be wrong in obedience. It may be hard or uncertain but Mary take the risk of saying yes to God.

CONCLUSION

The year 2020 was not that good to all of us. Today starts a new beginning a new year. The three characteristics of Mary in the gospel could be a great help to have a good start for this year. As we plunge therefore to this new beginning, we are being challenged to be true to our identity as sons and daughters of God. Let us humble ourselves, because those who humble himself know how to listen. Those who know how to listen are those persons who can obey the word of God. Identity comes mission.

While we acknowledge that the virtual initiatives cannot be the “status quo” or substitute to real interpersonal community and sacramental celebration, but a helpful alternative right now, we entrust everything to the grace and mercy of God. As God transcends human and physical barriers and limitations, he is truly present with, in, and among his people, especially the contrite and committed.

Identity comes mission. As Christians, we need to look at Mary as model of our faith and model of mission. Mary was very consistent in her identity and role as a disciple and as the Mother of Jesus.

Mr. Neil Conge
Configuration V Seminarian
Diocese of Borongan



SOLEMNITY OF THE
EPIPHANY OF THE LORD
JANUARY 03, 2021



*“And having been warned in a dream
not to return to Herod,
they departed for their country by another way.”*

READINGS:

Isaiah 60:1-6

Psalms 72:1-7, 10-14

Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12

THEME:

“Mission”

THE THREE MISSIONARIES

FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY

The three wise men are missionaries in their effort to look for Jesus. We are also called to be missionaries – to search and recognize the Lord.

INTRODUCTION

The Gospel spoke of Magi from the east who searched for Jesus guided by a star. We knew them as three wise men or the three kings. But never were they considered to be the “three missionaries”. Missionaries show and give Jesus to others. These magi were not known to have shown and given Jesus. In fact they were the ones looking for Him.

BODY

Is mission simply about giving and sharing Jesus to others; that the missionaries are those who have Jesus with them and they give Jesus to those who do not have Him yet in their lives? Or is mission also searching for Jesus and recognizing Him in our lives and in our world? In this sense, missionaries are not only those who have Jesus in them. Missionaries are also those who admit that they are searching and looking for the Lord.

Isaiah in today’s reading invites us to recognize the light of the Lord. Like the Magi from the east who searched for Jesus guided by a star, we are called to search and recognize the light, Jesus. Because the mystery of the epiphany is no other than Jesus the Light manifesting himself to all peoples. And this light will draw all peoples and nations upon himself.

Epiphany is Jesus telling us “I have come to be seen and known by all.” “I have come and I am giving myself to all.”

TO ALL – this is the mystery Paul speaks about in his Letter to the Ephesians, that Gentiles too are co-heirs in the promise of Jesus Christ.

Jesus then is the one giving himself to everybody. He is THE MISSIONARY as He gives Himself to us. And we are missionaries in Him – not first and foremost because we give Him, but because we search for Him and recognize Him. And in doing so, His light shines upon us and this light draws all peoples. We are living with so much darkness. Many are Herods who were troubled by the light. Many are Herods who do not want to look for and see the light – Jesus. And they who do not look for the light sow darkness.

CONCLUSION

Mission is to find Jesus, to search for Jesus, to look for Jesus, to recognize Jesus. Where? In our lives, in peoples we are with, in others, in the poor, in all life circumstances, in Bethlehems that are not easy to reach. Simply guided by a star, in faith, we know Jesus is born and so we shall find Him. And He shall be found. He shall make Himself found because He is the Epiphany. He was born to be seen and recognized by all.

Are we missionaries? Do we look for the light? Do we search for Jesus? Are we eager to find Him? Those who look for the light are not only missionaries. They are epiphanies. They share the light that draws people to adore the Lord.

Rev. Fr. Alain P. Manalo
Superintendent
Diocese of Imus Catholic Education System



EPIPHANY STAR

FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY

The light of the star manifests our Lord's Divine presence in the world. Our celebration of Epiphany today calls us to follow the Star that shines through the darkness and be missionaries of God's light on earth.

INTRODUCTION

We know Epiphany as the manifestation of our Lord through the light of a Star. Our liturgy today invites us to celebrate the manifestation of the Divine presence in the midst of life. This Epiphany of our Lord draws all of us to conversion. We are never the same when we encounter Christ in our life. And as Christ's light converts us, it also sends us outward to others. Epiphany leads us to do God's mission on earth. There are three themes that we can draw in our readings today.

BODY

First, Epiphany is God's Manifestation to the world. When the news of Christ's birth had spread from the tiny town of Bethlehem, it reached the Magi who saw His star in the East, and left everything to search for Him. They followed the star to Bethlehem in search of God.

The evangelist Matthew wanted the Jews to understand that the Gospel is universal to all religious seekers, not just to the chosen people. *Sa pagdiriwang natin ngayon, ipinakikilala sa atin ng Epipaniya ni Kristo ang Diyos na nagbigay, nagbibigay at magbibigay ng liwanag sa lahat. Nagpapakita si Kristo ng Kaniyang sarili sa lahat ng tao. Sa gitna ng dilim, sa gitna ng kadilimang nararanasan natin, nagpapakilala Siya.*

Second, Epiphany draws us to Conversion. The Magi did not return to Herod. They departed for their country by another way. They did not return by the same way they came.

They were no longer Magi; they became Wise Men. That soul-shaping encounter with the Child Jesus transformed them to walk another way. They lived their lives differently than before. Our encounter with Christ draws us deeply into His life and Light. An author, Macrina Wiederkehr, wrote:

“I am called to follow the star,
to sing it,
to live it
all the way to the cross and beyond.
O Creator of the stars,
You have become within me an unending Epiphany.”

Once a mother, whose son had been murdered, saw a star that said, “Forgive.” The star led her to a prison, to the murderer. The light of the star enabled her to discover within her own heart a mercy she didn’t know she possessed. So many people with hearts of courage have had epiphanies that led them to pathways of light. What is your epiphany? Where is the star leading you? How is our faith manifested in our conversion? Mission.

Third, Epiphany ends with a mission. *Tulad ng mga pantas, nagiging mga tagapagdala tayo ng Liwanag ni Kristo...* We carry forward the mission of Christ: to manifest Christ in the darkness of the world. Epiphany not only discloses Christ to the world, but also calls the world to show forth Christ.

We had a major, massive flooding caused by typhoon Ulysses. Homes submerged in roof-level floods. Many clambering up their roofs, wet, cold, crying wrenching tears. Nakakapangilabot ang video ng mga taga-Barangay Linao, Tuguegarao. One of the flood-hit areas with zero visibility. You could only hear trapped residents crying out for help, tearfully pleading to be rescued.

To follow a star can lead us to where we would rather not to go - sa pook na nababalutan ng kadiliman, at lugmok sa dusa... Sa panlipunang pakikisangkot. Bring them the Light that shines in darkness or to find God there who lights the inner blaze and tends the flame. When you keep the flame alive in you, you see more, you hear more. In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis writes that we must hear both: The cry of the earth and the cry of the poor. The pandemic has exposed the plights of the poor. The calamities have worsened the poverty of the already poor, furthered the displacement, and increased the hardship of vulnerable people. *Baka kailangang dito tayo dalhin ng Liwanag ni Kristo. Iyong magkaroon tayo ng kakayahang marinig ang daing ng mundo, ng kalikasan at ang panaghoy ng higit na nangangailangan.*

For us to hear the groaning of the earth and the groaning of the poor, the more that there should be an on-going conversion:

- on-going intergenerational solidarity;
- ecological sensitivity; and,
- ecological conversion and spirituality.

CONCLUSION

By listening to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor, we are also listening to God's voice. Madilim ang ating lakbayin. But when you see the anguished face of a child begins to soften, and when you see a person's pain being transformed, crises can be holy beginnings. If we allow them, we have much more to offer than we may realize and we are reminded of who we really are and what we have to offer one another. Let us hear the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.

Let the light of Christ grow in tremendous flame. As the poet Oscar Wilde writes, "We are all in the gutter, but some

of us are all looking at the stars.” Where is the Epiphany Star leading you?

Rev. Fr. John G. Barro
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CHRISTIAN MISSION IS TO LOVE LIKE GOD

FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY

INTRODUCTION

What is true love? When we humans express our love to one another, we express it in many different love languages. We say words of affirmation, use physical touch, give gifts, spend quality time and do acts of service. We have many ways to express our love to others, wanting what is good for them, but all of these expressions fall short of what true love is when it lacks one thing – vulnerability.

BODY

The feast of the Epiphany of the Lord teaches us to love in three ways:

First, to Love is to Welcome Wounds

Vulnerability comes from the Latin word ‘vulnus’ meaning wound. To be vulnerable is to be ready to be ‘wounded’ from rejection of your love, from ungratefulness, from unreciprocated love. Not all that we love will love us back and that is when true love is tested. Our true intentions in loving are unmasked when our love is unreciprocated. We get angry. We feel wronged. Then, we become indifferent because there is no point in loving when we are not loved back. Then you see the true form of our false loves – self-love. We love because we want to be loved. That is not loving in vulnerability. It is loving to gain security. Love is going out of ourselves, our security, our comfort zones. Love is being ready to be wounded. Will you still love despite the wounds?

Second, Jesus welcomed Wounds from Birth to Death

We look at the Baby Jesus and we will know the meaning of vulnerability and the meaning of our celebration today. It is the Epiphany of the Lord – God’s appearance and manifestation of His true love for us in Jesus. He emptied Himself for us taking the form of a slave; in a tiny, helpless, vulnerable babe wrapped in swaddling clothes all for the sake of true love.

God has not only been communicating His love for us from the very beginning and has been persistently showing us His love in ways we can see. Sometimes, we are just too blind to see – blinded by our self-love. Herod had an opportunity to gaze at the Lord but because of his self-love, his love for power, he rejected the love of God in Jesus and even plotted against this love. We have a Herod in all of us.

As Christians, our life is not about us. It is about God and others. It is our mission to make Jesus known to others by our very lives – at work, at school, at home, at every encounter, especially in times of crisis and uncertainty. If we are too hung up on our self-love, people will not see the light of Jesus in us but the blinding light of self, always seeking every affection, attention, and affirmation. If we are ready to be true disciples of Christ and live out our mission, we must go out of ourselves, be vulnerable in loving and be ready to get wounded. Jesus whom we follow was not only vulnerable in his birth, He remained vulnerable even until death, brutally wounded for His love for us.

Third, the Magi encountered Jesus’ vulnerable love and were never the same

The Magi showed us the way. They searched for the King far and wide. They still had questions and sought answers

did not linger. They went on with their journey in finding Jesus. They saw God's vulnerable love by seeking the light. When they saw what they were looking for and saw the Baby Jesus, they could not help but be vulnerable, offering their best gifts in worship and thanksgiving.

We seek the love that never fades, the love that never ends, the love that is true. Sometimes, we get lured by the 'lights' of the world – money, pleasure, glory, power. We get a foretaste of these false loves and we get hooked, addicted, never wanting to break away, but like the Magi, we must go on and follow the star. Only then we find true love. And when we do, our hearts will bow down in vulnerability realizing that we are in front of Love in all his vulnerability. In Jesus can we only find true love.

But it did not end there, the magi went back to their homes in another way. Once we find our true love, we can never be the same. False loves keep you imprisoned in yourself. True love liberates you from yourself to start loving God and others.

CONCLUSION

What, then, is true love? It is offering one's self in mutual vulnerability. When we look at babies, we see complete and total vulnerability and how do we respond? In complete vulnerability as well. When holding a baby in our arms, we drop our guard, we break down our wall, we become like a child speaking to a child. What more if it was the Baby Jesus in our arms? Ah! What an epiphany!

Mr. Gerald M. Moscardon
Configuration IV Seminarian
Diocese of Cubao



FEAST OF THE
BAPTISM OF THE LORD
JANUARY 10, 2021



*"You are my beloved Son,
with you I am well pleased."*

READINGS:

Genesis 1:1-5

Psalm 29

Acts 19:1-7

Mark 1:4-11

THEME:

"Mission"

OUR BAPTISM IS FOR MISSION

SOLEMNITY OF THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD

When Christ was baptized, God revealed to the whole world His Love and Mercy. The sacrament of baptism is indeed the continuation of that revelation of God's mercy shown in the mission of Christ here on earth.

INTRODUCTION

As we celebrate the solemnity of the Lord's Baptism, we join the whole Christian world in thanking and praising God for this immense love and mercy for humanity. The Lord's baptism reminds of God's faithfulness.

In this celebration too, I wish to draw some points for consideration from the theme: *Missio ad Gentes* because this is the ninth pastoral priority of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines for the celebration of the 5th Centenary of Christianization of the Philippines.

BODY

Let us focus my sharing on the theme of mission in three sections.

First, Baptism of Jesus is a baptism for mission.

Jesus' baptism is not a baptism of cleansing of sins, because he did not commit any sin whatever. His baptism is a baptism for Mission, a mission of salvation.

Jesus' mission is to bring redemption for the fallen humanity. To bring us back to the Father who has created us in His own image and likeness. To restore back the beauty that was bestowed on us human beings. In this mission of Jesus, we become God's children and heirs of the kingdom. We are

sustained by the Father so as to really reached heaven.

Hence, we who received baptism, we have been introduced to the faith. And we have promised to live that faith. It calls on us to share in the mission of Christ and of the Church. We are asked to be harbingers of evangelization by proclaiming Christ to people and to the World.

Because we have been baptized in Christ, thus, by our baptismal commitment we become also missionaries ourselves. We follow Christ's footsteps in establishing God's Kingdom here on earth.

Second, the Holy Spirit accompanies us in the mission.

Just as the Spirit of God hovered over the waters in the Creation, so the same Holy Spirit came down on the disciples of John (Acts 19:6-7) and they began to speak with tongues and prophesy the victory of good over evil.

The Mission is technically the mission of Christ. We are just sharers of this mission so that others might be able to have an access to heaven. It is the Holy Spirit who will be our guide us. It is the Holy Spirit who will enlighten us and accompany us till the end.

Third, our baptism carries a responsibility to continue Christ Mission.

We who have been baptized are also asked to continue the mission of Christ. As we celebrate this year's 500 centenary, it goes without saying that we are also invited to continue the mission of the Christ and the mission of the Church.

We cannot just be contented on the fact that we are baptized and that we have been incorporated into the Church.

We need to look into the responsibility that is demanded in the privileged of being baptized. There is a corresponding task to do, and a responsibility to fulfill.

CONCLUSION

As the solemnity of the Lord's Baptism unfolds, let us not fail to come to Mary our mother. Like any mother, she will guide us in our efforts to live our baptismal commitments for in the end it is where our Mission begins. Praise be Jesus Christ.

Most. Rev. Oscar L. Florencio, D.D.
Bishop of the
Military Ordinariate of the Philippines



BAPTISM, IDENTITY AND MISSION

SOLEMNITY OF THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD

INTRODUCTION

During a long test, a teacher approached a crying pupil. She asked, "Why are crying?" The poor child replied, "Teacher, this is very difficult. I do not know where and how to begin!" The good teacher smiled at the pupil and said, "Begin by writing your name on top of your paper."

Jesus is about to begin his public ministry, a difficult mission. From the first reading we heard...He is set as a covenant to the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring out prisoners from confinement, and from the dungeon, those who live in darkness. He shall bring forth justice to the nations. And from the Acts of the Apostles...He went about doing good and healed all those oppressed by the devil. What a mission!

BODY

The baptism of the Lord is the beginning of his 'public' life. It is an initiation to his mission. It is important to note that his mission begins with the unveiling of his identity as revealed by 1. John the Baptist; 2. the Holy Spirit; and 3. the voice of the Father.

The first to affirm Jesus' identity was John the Baptist. John declared that Jesus is mightier than he. 'I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you with the Holy spirit.' Even in the womb of his mother Elizabeth, he jumped for joy upon the visit of Mary as if declaring that Jesus is the only source of real joy. In another occasion he said, 'He must increase and I must decrease.' Indeed the testimony of John affirmed the identity of Jesus ultimately when he said, 'There is the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.'

The second to affirm Jesus' identity was the Holy Spirit. As the Spirit descended upon him at his baptism, Jesus was empowered. It is by the power of the Spirit that he accomplished his mission. Jesus himself declared quoting the prophet Isaiah, 'The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners.' Thus we say that the works of Jesus are the works of the Spirit. His works give witness to his identity. In a very special way, we may say, Jesus is what he does, and what he does is the work of the Spirit. There is no dichotomy between his words and his actions. What he proclaims, he lives out...and that is real empowerment.

The third to affirm Jesus' identity is the voice of the Father. The Father Himself declares that Jesus is His beloved son; with whom he is well pleased. This is an affirmation that no one can refute. Jesus is the Son of God not because he himself declares it, but because the Father says so. It is not a self claimed proclamation as some people would do. This is the core of his identity, He is God's beloved son.

Three realities that affirm the identity of Jesus: John the Baptist declaration; the descent (and empowerment) of the Holy Spirit; and the voice of the Father. In his baptism, Jesus begun his mission with a clear identity...a consistent identity until his mission is accomplished.

Jesus is who John the Baptist proclaimed in the desert. This is important but not enough. "I have a testimony greater than John's. The works that I do testify on my behalf", the Lord said. We too should not base our self understanding only with what people say about us. This is very dangerous as it may make us "people-pleaser". Let what we do, through the power of the Holy Spirit, whether seen or not, recognized

or otherwise, appreciated or ignored, reveal our identity. May we never live an incoherent and inconsistent life. May we do what is right, good and true because that is who we are, created in the image and likeness of God who is all goodness, righteousness and truth.

CONCLUSION

In baptism, we all share in the very mission of Jesus. We are called to be priest, prophet and king. It is a participation in his mission which we try to accomplish, hopefully with the same clear understanding of who we are.

But to say we are what people say about us or we are we do is still insufficient. At the end of the day, what will remain significant is not what people or our works say about us. Rather, it is what the Father will say of us. We may fool people and gain applause and recognition, or be hypocrites with our actions, but God cannot be fooled. Everything, even what's in our hearts, is known to him. Although it is important to consider what people and our actions speak about us, let us never forget what the Father will say. Jesus was persecuted and despised, but he never went against the will of the Father.

The good news is this, despite God's absolute knowledge of who we are, including our flaws and weaknesses, He still loves us. We are loved. That is who we are. That is our identity. Let us start, continue and finish our mission rooted in this reality. The mission is indeed overwhelming. But if we know who we really are, we will persevere.

At the top of our test paper of life and mission, let us never forget to write who we are...that we are beloved. We are loved. Amen.

Rev. Fr. August C. Pulido
Diocese of Paranaque
Parochial Schools Association



OUR CHRISTIAN MISSION, IT CHANGES US SOLEMNITY OF THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD

INTRODUCTION

Five hundred years ago, the mission to sow the seeds of Christianity in the Philippine archipelago was begun by Fray Pedro de Valderrama, O.S.A. when he made the first recorded baptism in Philippine soil. On April 14, 1521, Fray Valderrama baptized the indigenous king of Cebu, Rajah Humabon and changes became evident in his life. First, a change in name; from Humab-on, which means “fond of ambush,” he was christened “Carlos” in honor of King Charles V of Spain and a name which means “strong” or “clear understanding.” Second, a change from polygamous to monogamous marriage. One of his numerous wives was the sister of Datu Lapu-lapu, but he did not choose her and instead married Hara Humani. Third, it became his mission that all those under his rule will also be baptized; thus, his queen was christened “Juana” and 800 Cebuanos embraced the Catholic faith.

BODY

Today we are celebrating the Solemnity of the Baptism of our Lord and it reminds us of our mission as baptized Christians and the changes that we Catholics should live-out. Three words to guide our reflection – remission, admission, and commission.

First, REMISSION. When we were baptized, it changed us because there was remission of sin; all our sins are forgiven, thus we share in the Paschal Mystery of Christ, in His suffering, death, and resurrection. The Prophet Isaiah reminds us in the First Reading, “Let the scoundrel forsake his way, and the wicked man his thoughts; let him turn to the Lord for mercy; to our God, Who is generous in forgiving.” It is our mission to

change ourselves in order to grow and mature in our relationship with God; whenever we renew our baptismal vows and whenever we turn to God in His mercy and accept His forgiveness in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, we relive this change – the remission of sins.

Second, ADMISSION. When we were baptized, it changed us because there was admission into the community of believers. We became members of the living Body of Christ – the Church. John the Apostle reminds us in the second reading, “Beloved: Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is begotten by God, and everyone who loves the Father loves also the one begotten by Him.” It is our mission to change ourselves to become genuine believers and earnest lovers. Not just either a believing or a loving community, but a believing and loving community; so that others will develop that faith that they wanted to be admitted in the Catholic Church.

Third, COMMISSION. When we were baptized, it changed us because we became an adopted child of God and is called to a life of holiness. Now, we are being commissioned as sons and daughters of God and be with the mission of Christ. In the Gospel of Mark, a voice came from the heavens, “You are my beloved Son; with You I Am well pleased.” As adopted sons and daughters of God, we are commissioned and are co-missioners for service to the world, doing our corporal and spiritual works of mercy. For being a baptized Christian is to be Christ active in the world today! We do not do this mission alone because we do it with Christ and with our fellow Christians. If we continue the mission of Christ, that we also hope to what the Father said, “These are my beloved sons and daughters, in whom I am well pleased.

CONCLUSION

We are part of the 500 years of Christianity in the Philippines and let us prove that we are baptized Christians, not just in name or certificate! We carry on our Christian mission, it changes us!

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MISSION: “BABANGON AT AAHON!”

SOLEMNITY OF THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD

INTRODUCTION

Our local church in the Philippines, along with the larger part of Asia, is oftentimes characterized by economic poverty and destitution. However, despite this social reality, Filipinos are known for keeping smiles in their faces, a lively spirit that rejuvenates at times of distress, and a strong sense of faith in the midst of life’s uncertainties. Remember typhoon Yolanda – CNN reporter Anderson Cooper admired Filipinos in his broadcast, recognizing their “strength and resiliency.” In the face of this tragedy, Filipinos all over the world were moved to extend support for Yolanda victims, as “kabay-bayan,” with one voice; “Babangon at Aahon!”

BODY

In life’s ambiguities, one only reaches clarity and meaning when God’s creative Spirit hovers over our chaos and anxiety, when life’s darkness is given light and is recreated (cf. 1st Reading: Gen 1:2-3). Christian life becomes vibrant because of the breath of God that nourishes and refreshes. A confident disposition is drawn from God’s assuring voice that resounds over our life’s mighty waters (cf. Psalm: Ps 29:3)

The Baptism of the Lord resembles the threshold to his public ministry. And at the same time, the starting point of his mission as an itinerant preacher. At this moment, the identity of the Lord is confirmed by the audible assurance of the Father and the visible action of the Spirit that descended

upon Jesus. This is the epiphany of the Father, Son, and Spirit – the Blessed Trinity; and the revelation that confirms the mission of Jesus as being sent by the Father; “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Mk 1:11). Luke, in his Gospel adds the command; “listen to him” (Lk 9:35)

What pleases the Father is the willingness of the Son to stand in solidarity with sinners. Although he has nothing to repent of, Jesus stooped down to be washed by John’s baptism of repentance. As St. Paul says, “he who knew no sin was made sin for our sake,” (2 Cor 5:29) and that “he was made a curse for us” (Gal 3:13).

Indeed, the Evangelist summarizes this mission of the Lord; “for God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (Jn 3:16), climaxed with the cross in Jerusalem to which the Lord’s baptism is oriented; “There is a baptism with which I must be baptized, and how great is my anguish until it is accomplished” (Lk 12:50). The identity confirmed in baptism comes with a mission. It is in the cross, in word and deed, that complete solidarity with sinners is bestowed – a solidarity that effected salvation for all.

The baptism of John was of water and repentance. The baptism commanded by the Lord is of the Holy Spirit (cf. Mk 1:4-8; Mt 18:19), “grace upon grace” (Jn 1:16), making all things new (cf. 21:5) and bringing good tidings to the poor (cf. Lk 4:18)

In this baptism the we received, faith in the Blessed Trinity is professed. The baptized are assimilated into the blessed life of God: the eternal exchange of love and mutual self-donation between the Father, Son, and Spirit (cf. CCC 221, 232-234). Being made in likeness with the God who stoops down, “bumababa at nakikipamayan,” with the mission to save and to give eternal life. (cf. Jn 3:16)

By this baptism, we receive the Holy Spirit and take part in the prophetic mission of the Lord (cf. 2nd Reading: Acts 19:2-3) who although God, emptied himself and born in the likeness of men (cf. Phil 2:6-11), who set an example of poverty in total dependence to the Father, and chose to be present in the least in society (cf. Mt 25:40). This memory of his saving deed is sustained by the same Holy Spirit in us (cf. Jn 14:26) and deepened in prayer. This intimate encounter with the Lord directs authentic solidarity, compassion, and tender

CONCLUSION

These trying times are testing our resiliency. How far can we go with the present global health crisis? How near can we be to our neighbor with the pandemic that limits connections within virtual platforms? The Philippines was devastated by successive typhoons from mid-October, what fitting response did we offer? In the wake of these disasters, personalities used their influence in social media to spread means of help; from virtual concerts-for-a-cause, to donations and emergency services - a manifestation that compassion and solidarity can touch the hearts even of those afar. Solidarity can influence and be contagious in social media. Let us be a voice for the voiceless, the needy, and the poor (cf. Prov 31:8-9)

In his baptism, the Lord explicitly showed God's solidarity with our challenges and struggles in life. In solidarity with our neighbor, with special love of preference for the poor and suffering kababayan because their need for love is greater (cf. PCP II, 122-136), we share in the mission of the Lord as Messiah and are enabled by grace to say from the depths of our hearts; "Babangon at Aahon!"; "a love that draws near and becomes real" (Fratelli Tutti, no. 197), a love that pleases the Father. (cf. Mk 1:11)

In his baptism, the Lord explicitly showed God’s solidarity with our challenges and struggles in life. In solidarity with our neighbor, with special love of preference for the poor and suffering kababayan because their need for love is greater (cf. PCP II, 122-136), we share in the mission of the Lord as Messiah and are enabled by grace to say from the depths of our hearts; “Babangon at Aahon!”; “a love that draws near and becomes real” (Fratelli Tutti, no. 197), a love that pleases the Father. (cf. Mk 1:11)

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May these guides help our spiritual shepherds to inspire the Catholic faithful to give to others the gift with which they have been blessed 500 years ago: the light of Christ.

REV. FR. NOLAN A. QUE, PhD
ECCE/CEAP – NCR/RCAMES
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gifted to give



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