

A Beautiful Journey of Faith

Five Centuries of Philippine Catholicism

Joyfully celebrating in 2021 half a millennium of Christianity (1521-2021), the Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines is a major actor in this Southeast Asian island nation as well as within the wider Asian and Universal Church. While history continually unfolds, this popular overview of the Philippine Church seeks to trace pivotal events through the past centuries. The piece concludes with the year 2015, since this year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the close of the Second Vatican Council (1965-2015) as well as the wonderful pastoral visit of Pope Francis to the Philippines in early 2015. This presentation provides an opportunity to review both the history and the current situation of the largest local Church in Asia. Statistics in 2015 showed that the Philippine population has well exceeded 100 million. The five major religious bodies and their percentage of the local population are: Roman Catholicism (82.9%), Protestantism (5.2%), Islam (4.6%), Iglesia Filipina Independiente (2.6%), and Iglesia ni Cristo (2.3%). The Philippines is the world's third largest local Church (after Brazil and Mexico). Of Asia's 120+ million Catholics over 60% are Filipinos. These brief, yet significant, facts invite deeper exploration of the multi-faceted Philippine Church.

Background

The Philippine archipelago is composed of 7,107 islands and islets, of which the largest are Luzon in the north and Mindanao in the south. In central Philippines there are several medium-sized islands known as the Visayan Islands. Stretching from the southwestern tip of Mindanao toward Borneo is a chain of small islands collectively known as the Sulu Archipelago. The population of southwestern

Mindanao and Sulu is predominantly Muslim.

There is evidence of human settlements in the islands as early as 20,000 BC. The small black people, called Negritos by the Spaniards, were the first to arrive. Later they were driven into the mountainous interior when immigrants belonging to the brown-skinned Malay race reached the islands. Today one finds various hill tribes such as the Aetas and Ifugao of Luzon and the Mansakas, Mandayas, and Bukidnon of Mindanao; many of these peoples still practice their traditional religions. Malay Filipinos occupy the lowlands, constitute the majority of the population, and have become Christian. They form several distinct groups; the Visayan, Tagalog, Ilokano, and Bikolano are among the most numerous.

Arrival of Spaniards

In March 1521 Ferdinand Magellan arrived in search of spices and converts for Charles I (Emperor Charles V); it was his son Prince Philip, later King Philip II, whose name was bestowed on the islands by Villalobos in 1542. Lapulapu, a native chieftain of Cebu, resisted Magellan's claim of Spanish sovereignty, and he was mortally wounded by Lapulapu's spear thrust. In 1565 Miguel Lopez de Legazpi established the first permanent Spanish settlement in Cebu. In 1571 Legazpi moved his headquarters to Manila, making it the capital of the colony. By the end of the century, most of the lowlands were under Spanish rule, except for some southern islands which remained Muslim.

Islam had been introduced in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century. It gradually exercised a strong influence and

helped develop a type of sophisticated political organization, semifeudal and predatory, in Mindanao and Sulu and initially in Manila. When the Spaniards encountered Muslims in the Philippines their hostile attitudes based on Muslim-Christian encounters in Europe (the struggle for independence from Moorish rule in the Iberian Peninsula) colored their outlook and relations; these very negative attitudes were also transmitted to non-Muslim Filipinos.

Systematic Christianization

An organized program of evangelization of the Philippines was begun in 1565 by the Augustinians who accompanied Legazpi's expedition. They were followed by Franciscans (1578), Jesuits (1581), Dominicans (1587), and Augustinian Recollects (1606) from both Spain and Mexico. Manila became a bishopric in 1579 and an archbishopric in 1595.

The Spanish system of the *Patronato Real*, or royal patronage of the Church in the Indies, facilitated the implementation of an evangelization program. Under this arrangement, the Spanish crown gave financial support and protection to the Church in the Philippines while exercising a large measure of control over its activities. Missionaries traveled to the Philippines in the king's ships. While engaged in mission work, they were entitled to a stipend drawn from either the colonial government directly or from the right to tribute in certain territories (*encomiendas*) into which the country was initially divided. The *encomienda* system was gradually abandoned during the seventeenth century after widespread criticism of extortion and other abuses.

On the other hand, the appointment of missionaries to a parish or mission station was subject to the approval of the governor as vice-patron. In fact, it was Philip II himself who determined that each missionary group should have its own section of the country for evangelization purposes. Under this system the Church in turn exerted great influence on government

policy. The early missionaries often sought to protect the natives from the abuses of the conquistadors and *encomenderos*; they had a vigorous leader in Fray Domingo de Salazar, OP, the first bishop of the Philippines. The synod that he summoned in 1582 clarified many difficult problems regarding the conquest, settlement, and administration of the country in accordance with Christian ideals and principles of justice.

The Philippine Church of the sixteenth century certainly took sides, and it was not with the rich and powerful nor with their fellow Spaniards, but with those who were oppressed and victims of injustice. Church historian John Schumacher notes: "Skeptics have often questioned the reality of the rapid conversion of sixteenth-century Filipinos. If one wishes the answer, it is to be found right here, that the Church as a whole took the side of the poor and the oppressed, whether the oppressors were Spaniards or Filipino *principales*."



Mission Methods

The Spanish missionaries in the Philippines employed a variety of approaches to evangelization. The scattered clan villages were gathered together into larger communities (*pueblos, cabeceras*); often this implied radical lifestyle changes and hence could only be accomplished with difficulty

and very gradually. Instruction was given in native languages, as few Filipinos outside the *Intramuros* area of Manila were ever able to read, write, or speak Spanish with any proficiency. In most missions primary schools supplied the new Christian communities with catechists and local officials. Religion was made to permeate society by substituting splendid liturgical and para-liturgical observances (*fiestas*, processions, novenas) for the traditional rites and festivals; many pious associations of prayer and charity were formed and promoted.

Education and Social Services

These tasks were almost exclusively the concern of the Church during the entire period of Spanish rule. Before the end of the sixteenth century, Manila had three hospitals, one for Spaniards, another for natives, and a third for the Chinese. The first two were conducted by Franciscans, the third by the Dominicans. Later (1611) the Hospitallers of Saint John of God came to make hospital work their special field of activity. In 1595 the Jesuits opened a grammar school for Spanish boys that later developed into the University of San Ignacio and had attached to it the residential college of San José, founded in 1601 and today the San José Seminary.

The year 1611 saw the beginnings of the Dominican University of Santo Tomás, which continues today as a vibrant educational center. In 1640 the Dominicans also took charge of the College of San Juan de Letrán, started about a decade earlier by a zealous layman for the education of orphans. Various religious communities of women established themselves in Manila in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; frequently, they undertook the education of girls. Among these sisterhoods, that begun by Ignacia del Espíritu Santo, a Chinese *mestiza*, in 1684 and today known as the Religious of the Virgin Mary (RVM), deserves special mention as the first locally founded religious institute, specifically for indigenous women.

Financial Support

The considerable funds required for the support of these schools, hospitals, and charitable works came from pious donations and legacies, called *obras pías*; they were often invested in the galleon trade or in large agricultural estates, the so-called friar lands. These operations often tainted the Church as being involved with commercialism. At the same time, the friar lands were leased to tenant cultivators for development and administration, an arrangement that led to frequent conflicts of interest and a deepening resentment of the Church as landlord. This background must be borne in mind for a balanced understanding of the anticlerical reaction that developed in the latter nineteenth century among a people deeply and sincerely Catholic.

Native Clergy

Catholicism had taken permanent root in the Philippines as the religion of the people by the eighteenth century, if not earlier. However, it had one serious weakness: the retarded development of the native clergy. The unsatisfactory results of early experiments in Latin America had made the Spanish missionaries in the Philippines extremely cautious in admitting native candidates to the priesthood. Apparently, only in the late seventeenth century were native Filipinos ordained. A proposal of Gianbattista Sidotti, a member of Cardinal Charles de Tournon's entourage, to erect a regional seminary in Manila for the whole of East Asia was sharply rejected by the crown (1712).

Bishops became increasingly eager for a diocesan clergy completely under their jurisdiction when conflicts over parish appointments continued—conflicts between the bishops and the religious orders on the one hand, and the bishops and the government on the other. Since very few secular priests came to the Philippines from Spain, this meant ordaining large numbers of native men. Archbishop Sancho de Santa Justa y Rufina of Manila (1767-1787) threatened to take away their parishes from

the religious who refused to submit to episcopal visitation; he also ordained natives even when they lacked the necessary aptitude and training. The results proved disastrous, confirming the prevailing opinion that natives, even if admitted to the priesthood, were incapable of assuming its full responsibilities. Some improvement in formation and an increase in vocations occurred after the arrival of the Vincentians (1862), who took charge of diocesan seminaries. Even so, the departure of a large proportion of Spanish clergy after the transfer of sovereignty from Spain to the United States (1898) left over 700 parishes vacant.

Religious Clergy

The privileges of the *Patronato Real* conferred by the Holy See on the Spanish crown were a mixed blessing; they promoted constructive collaboration between the Church and the colonial government, but it also led to friction. The focus of difficulty was the religious parish priest and the extent to which he was subject to episcopal visitation and control. The conflict gave rise to series of crises that began as early as the administration of Bishop Salazar (1581-1594). In 1744 the Holy See ruled that religious parish priests were subject to the jurisdiction of the ordinary in all matters pertaining to their parish duties (*in officio officinando*) and to their religious superiors in their personal conduct.

With the advent of the revolutionary era in Europe and the loss of Spain's American colonies, the terms of the problem in the Philippines changed. It became widely believed in official circles that the presence of the religious in the parishes was a political necessity, not so much because they were religious as because they were Spaniards and could be relied upon to keep the population loyal. This seems to have been one factor behind the thinking related to the royal decree of 1862 transferring the Mindanao missions from the Augustinian Recollects to the newly returned Jesuits (they had been expelled in 1768) and giving the former an

equivalent number of parishes in Manila and Cavite, which were consequently taken away from the native clergy. The result was mounting disaffection among the native priests thus deprived or threatened with removal. Naturally, the Filipino priests assailed the government policy; among their active leaders and spokesmen were Fathers Gómez, Burgos, and Zamora, who were executed by the government for alleged complicity in a mutiny of native garrison troops in Cavite (1872).

The deaths of these Filipino priests gave a powerful impetus to the emergence of Filipino nationalism by sensitizing Filipinos to injustices by the Spanish colonial government. The movement began as an initiative for colonial reforms led by Dr. José Rizal (1862-1896); after Rizal's arrest and execution for treason, it developed into a separatist movement. The ensuing revolution (1896-1898), which was markedly anti-friar, though usually not anticlerical or anti-Catholic, was cut short by the intervention of the United States, which demanded cession of the Philippines at the conclusion of the Spanish-American War.

Separation of Church and State

The change of sovereignty ended the *Patronato* system. The United States' policy of Church-State separation was extended to the Philippines, but interpreted in a manner much less favorable to the Church. Thus, a system of nonsectarian public education was established that failed to take into account that the overwhelming majority of Filipinos were Catholics. In addition, there was the strong influence of hundreds of American public-school teachers, most of whom were Protestants. They were popularly known as the Thomasites; a group of 540 arrived in 1901 aboard the *U.S.S. Thomas* and many others followed. The professed neutralism in religious matters of the state university, founded in 1911, was copied by other privately founded nonsectarian universities, resulting in the undermining of religious belief among the educated class.

Schism

One consequence of the revolutionary upheaval was the formation by Gregorio Aglipay, a Filipino secular priest, of a schismatic church along nationalist lines, the Philippine Independent Church or *Iglesia Filipina Independiente* (1902). Initially it drew a considerable following; however, it soon broke up into factions, some of which rapidly deserted Catholicism in doctrine as well as in discipline. The Supreme Court (1906-1907) also restored to the Catholic Church much of the property that had been taken over by the Aglipayans. The largest Trinitarian faction was received into full communion by the Protestant Episcopal Church (United States), established in the Philippines since the beginning of the century.

Protestant Missions

Protestant denominations sent mission personnel to the Philippines almost as soon as the transfer of sovereignty was effected. In 1901 Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist, and United Brethren groups, along with societies such as the Christian Missionary Alliance, the YMCA, and the American Bible Society, formed an Evangelical Union to coordinate their activities. A denomination of local origin with an evangelical orientation, the *Iglesia ni Cristo*, was founded in 1914.

Church Response

The normal life of the Catholic Church suffered disastrously during the years following 1898; in several respects it would be decades before a condition approximating "normalcy" would again be reached. From 1898 to 1900 there were almost no resident bishops; diocesan priests remained in very short supply and some had defected to the Aglipayans; seminaries were closed in 1898 and did not reopen until 1904. From 1898 to 1903 the total number of friars decreased over 75% from 1,013 to 246. In a word, the Church was in chaos.

The true beginnings of the reorganization of the Church began with the persistent efforts of Monsignor Guidi through his negotiations

with the American government and the Filipino clergy. Leo XIII, in his apostolic letter *Quae mari sinico* (1902) reorganized the hierarchy, created four new dioceses, and strongly recommended to the Philippine hierarchy the formation of a native clergy. The first official Provincial Council of Manila was convened in 1907 with the goals of reviving the faith of the Filipinos, restoring the local Church, and inspiring in the clergy a spirit of apostolic zeal.

Meanwhile, the severe shortage of priests and religious was met in part by new, non-Spanish missionary congregations of women and men from Europe, Australia, and America. For example, male missionary societies that responded to the pressing needs in the 1905-1941 period are: Irish Redemptorists (1905), Mill Hill Missionaries (1906), Scheut-CICM (1907), Sacred Heart Missionaries and Divine Word Society (1908), LaSalle Brothers (1911), Oblates of Saint Joseph (1915), Maryknoll Missioners (1926), Columban Missioners (1929), Society of Saint Paul (1935), Quebec-PME Society (1937), and Oblates-OMI (1939). Many dedicated female religious came as missionaries to the Philippines, often working in partnership with the societies just mentioned.

By the mid-1920s, the situation was taking a turn for the better; some significant factors in the survival and resurgence of the Church were: the revitalization of Catholic education, growth of Filipino diocesan and religious vocations, a more educated laity, Church involvement in social questions and the labor movement, and the involvement of Catholics in national life. The celebration of the XXXIII International Eucharistic Congress in Manila (1937) focused the attention of the Christian world on the Philippines and deeply inspired thousands of Filipino Catholics.

Second World War

Japanese forces invaded in December 1941. Allied forces under General MacArthur returned in 1944, but severe fighting continued until the Japanese surrender in

August 1945. Manuel Roxas became president of the second independent Republic of the Philippines on July 4, 1946. The war inflicted heavy damage; 257 priests and religious lost their lives, and losses in ecclesiastical property and equipment were estimated at 250 million pesos (U.S.\$ 125 million). Priests, brothers, sisters, and dedicated Catholic women and men exhibited great faith and heroism during the war; many suffered imprisonment.

Organization of Philippine Bishops

The origins of what is known today as the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) can be traced back to February 1945 when Apostolic Delegate William Piani, even as the war was still raging, appointed John Hurley, SJ, to take charge of relief work and created the Catholic Welfare Organization (CWO). As the very name indicates, the primary purpose of the CWO was to assist in alleviating the immediate suffering and destruction brought on by the war. On July 17, 1945 all the bishops met in Manila for their first meeting after the Japanese Occupation; they requested that the CWO become the official organization of the Hierarchy of the Philippines. In subsequent years, the CWO continued to be largely engaged in relief services and the rehabilitation of Church institutions; it also became the vehicle through which the interests and values of the Church were protected and furthered.

The 1945-1965 period in the life of the local Church in the Philippines is characterized by: quite rapid recovery from the ravages of war, greatly expanded school system at upper levels, involvement of Catholics (laity, sisters, clergy) in social action, and growing Filipinization of Church structures and administration. The First Plenary Council of the Philippines (1953) focused on the "preservation, enrichment, and propagation of Catholic life" and offered Church resources "to renew the social order." The Church became involved in Catholic Action programs with farmers (FFF) and workers (FFW). Guidance from the hierarchy

continued; from 1945-1965 the CWO issued 39 joint pastoral letters and statements on a variety of subjects relevant to Church and civil society. The Philippine bishops sponsored a Marian Congress in Manila (1954) and inaugurated the Pontificio Collegio-Seminario Filippino in Rome (1961). The period saw renewal programs introduced; the Christian Family Movement (CFM) came to the Philippines in the 1950s; the *Cursillos de Cristianidad* introduced in 1963 (and the evangelization seminars for various Church sectorial groups they inspired) ignited a renewed fervor of lay involvement in the Church.

1965: A Pivotal Year

In mid-year, the nation observed a six-day renewal-celebration of the quadricentennial of the beginning of the systematic evangelization of the Philippines (1565-1965). The bishops established the Mission Society of the Philippines, signifying Filipinos' commitment to spread the gift of faith they had received to other lands. Two more events would prove to shape significantly the experience and mission of this local Church. The first was the election of Ferdinand Marcos as president of the Philippines; the second was the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council on December 8, 1965.

Authoritarian Rule

The Philippine constitution, modeled on that of the United States, established a democratic form of government. Ferdinand E. Marcos, first elected president in 1965, declared martial law in 1972 and imposed a form of "constitutional authoritarianism." The martial law period posed new, challenging questions for the Church and nation. Among the more pernicious effects of the two-decade Marcos era (1965-1986) were increased militarization, insurgency, the absence of juridical procedures, the destruction of democratic processes, economic decline, and pervasive fear. The end result, in the words of a Filipino social

scientist, was to place the country “on the trembling edge of a social volcano.”

This period proved a time of testing and growth for the local Church. Prophetic stances were often met by military abuse, imprisonment, and torture, and even deportation for foreign missionaries. The Church evolved a position of “critical collaboration,” cooperating with the regime on programs beneficial to the populace while criticizing government actions judged harmful.

An important 1977 pastoral letter, *The Bond of Love in Proclaiming the Good News*, addressed many social problems as well as the divisions within the Church created by various positions taken vis-à-vis martial law (e.g. the absence of a clear stance and the long-delayed response on the part of most members of the hierarchy; the infiltration of Church structures and institutions by left-leaning priests and religious). The pastoral letter sought to enunciate a clear, holistic vision to guide the Church’s mission of integral evangelization:

This is EVANGELIZATION: the proclamation, above all, of SALVATION from sin; the liberation from everything oppressive to man; the DEVELOPMENT of man in all his dimensions, personal and communitarian; and ultimately, the RENEWAL OF SOCIETY in all its strata through the interplay of the GOSPEL TRUTHS and man’s concrete TOTAL LIFE.... THIS IS OUR TASK. THIS IS OUR MISSION.

President Marcos announced the lifting of martial law on January 17, 1981. It was carefully timed—three days before the inauguration of United States President Ronald Regan, and exactly one month before Pope John Paul II’s scheduled visit to the Philippines. In view of the broad range of authoritarian controls retained by Marcos, the lifting of martial law was recognized by the Filipino people as a purely cosmetic gesture. The papal visit brought two clear messages to Filipinos: a need for dynamic faith in their lives and an emphasis on justice

and peace. Specifically, John Paul II told the president and government leaders: “Even in exceptional situations that may at times arise, one can never justify any violation of the fundamental dignity of the human person or of the basic rights that safeguard this dignity.”

The assassination of Benigno Aquino on August 21, 1983 ushered in a period of national mourning and a widespread clamor for justice and truth. In this highly charged atmosphere, the local Church’s response was crucial. Jaime Cardinal Sin, Archbishop of Manila since 1974, cautioned Filipinos: “If we allow his death to fan the flames of violence and division, then he will have died in vain.”

Events moved rapidly in the ensuing years. Filipino consciousness had been awakened; Philippine society had been galvanized. The Church did not remain on the sidelines during this national crisis. In the volatile context that followed the elections of 1986, the Catholic bishops issued a statement declaring that fraud provides no moral legitimacy for any regime. If citizens agreed that the election had been “stolen,” they should oblige the regime to respect their will. The bishops added: “But we insist: Our acting must always be according to the Gospel of Christ, that is, in a peaceful, non-violent way.”

People Power One

An analysis of the story of the “bloodless revolution” of February 1986 and the roles played by church people and Cardinal Sin is instructive. The overthrow of the Marcos regime was “a victory of *moral* values over the sheer physical force on which he had relied” [J. Carroll]. It signaled people’s determination not to shed Filipino blood. The revolution was a “movement for active non-violence which was promoted by Church-related groups” [*ibid.*]. In addition, “the February Revolution was a *political* event, not a social revolution” [*ibid.*]. Basic social issues of wealth and power that plagued the nation for generations remained. Many Filipinos still found themselves

outside the mainstream of national social, political, and economic life.

Aquino Presidency

Corazon C. Aquino, catapulted into office with little experience, served as Philippine president from 1986-1992. Aquino's main contribution was the reestablishment of a democratically functioning government. She began by enacting a temporary "freedom constitution." In May 1986, Aquino appointed a constitutional commission (including Church people) and asked that a new document be produced within three months. This constitution was ratified overwhelmingly by a national referendum in 1987.

Difficult issues faced Aquino: a bankrupt economy, communist insurgents, the status of the United States military bases, coup plotters, natural disasters, a burgeoning population, Islamic separatists, the foreign debt, agrarian reform—the list appeared endless. Yet, she guided the Filipino people to free and fair elections in May 1992 and the orderly transfer of power to President Fidel Ramos (1992-1998), the first Protestant president of the Philippines. Aquino, an "icon of integrity," died on August 1, 2009.

Assessing the Social Situation

The Marcos years (1965-1986) further accentuated the mass poverty that had long been and continues to be the most tragic aspect of Filipino life. Per capita income in 2000 was estimated at \$1,046 per year; nearly 50% of Filipinos were living below the poverty line. The foreign debt in 2000 was \$52.4 billion; in the Marcos years alone, it moved from a manageable \$599 million to \$26 billion. Servicing the domestic and foreign debt was absorbing an average of 40% of the government budget. In 2000 the unemployment rate was 11.8% and under-employment stood at 22%. Filipinos were found in 193 countries of the world; overseas foreign workers numbered 2.96 million; undocumented personnel were 1.91 million; and, there were 2.33 million permanent residents overseas. The total number of

Filipinos overseas stood at 7.2 million—fully 10% of the total population. Locally, graft and corruption remained prevalent—even endemic; environmental degradation continued; the infant mortality rate was high. In stark contrast to the prevalent poverty, there are pockets of great luxury, underlining the gross inequity of income distribution.

In the political system, power, like wealth, remained concentrated in the hands of a few influential politicians, business, and military people. There appeared to be a self-perpetuating social system and political culture. Politicians, for the most part, did not introduce truly transformative social programs into their platforms.

In contemporary Philippines, diverse ideologies, with varying political visions and programs, all promise a better life for the Filipino. There are both non-violent and armed or revolutionary positions. The left is usually identified with the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), its militant New People's Army (NPA), and the National Democratic Front (NDF), which it dominates. The revolutionary left's protracted struggle has caused destruction; a small group of church workers continues to promote this Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ideology. In southern Philippines, two Islamic political groups continue to be serious threats to peace.

The Philippine local Church, following the lead of Vatican II, seeks to involve itself with the lives and struggles of Filipinos, their "joys, hopes, griefs, and anxieties" (cf. GS 1). Recently, Church leaders wrote: "Such are the challenges that the Church has to face in its evangelizing and liberating mission. We have to bring our considerable resources as people of God to bear upon these problems."

The political fortunes of the Filipino people and the consequent social and economic ramifications have helped shape the very identity and perspectives of the local Church. In a word, the *context* has shaped the believing community and has significantly influenced the *content* of its program of evangelization; all these elements are

necessary ingredients for a full appreciation of the vibrant Catholicism present in the Philippines today.



Implementation of Vatican II

The Second Vatican Council promoted a major ecclesiological paradigm shift, entailing changes in theologies, values, and orientations. Received by the local Church of the Philippines, it prompted the Filipino bishops to launch a renewed evangelization; the social apostolate was among its emphases. Early efforts centered on the formation and support of unions and cooperatives for farmers, laborers, and fishermen. The bishops issued several pastoral letters on social action, justice, and development. They sponsored a National Rural Development Congress in 1967, the slogan of which, “The Church Goes to the Barrios,” became axiomatic for the Church’s commitment to development and social justice. The bishops established and funded the National Secretariat for Social Action, Justice and Peace (NASSA) as their means of coordinating the social justice apostolate. The influential Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Conference (MSPC) was established in 1971. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Church’s vision of human development as integral to evangelization expanded from a

concern for social change to include the need for structural change. It became clear that efforts that had improved the conditions of the farming and working classes could not be sustained without corresponding political leverage. Church involvement in broader social, political, and economic questions became imperative.

Vatican II ecclesiology has taken root in the Philippine Church. Growth has often been difficult and uncertain; it has required deep faith to discern and follow the Spirit’s promptings in the midst of challenging historical circumstances and social conditions. Yet, this journey has resulted in a more mature, vibrant local Church. The presence of strong Base Christian Communities (BECs) provides grass roots structures for spiritual, catechetical, ministerial, and social growth. Important strengths are present in this Church: the inductive and experiential approach of theology; its inculturated social teaching; its spirituality of human development; its renewed ecclesiology / missiology; its concrete service to many Filipinos facing diverse dehumanizing social ills; its engagement in social issues in a non-partisan but active manner; its efforts to promote and practice non-violent approaches to socio-political crises; its commitment to create structures of participation in Church and society. The Church also has its recent witnesses—and martyrs (to mention only a few): Malaybalay diocesan priest Neri Satur (October 14, 1991), Bishop Benjamin de Jesus, OMI (February 4, 1997), Father Rhoel Gallardo, CMF (May 3, 2000), Father Benjamin Inocencio, OMI (December 28, 2000), and Scholastic “Richie” Fernando, SJ (October 17, 1996). Several foreign missionaries, especially those working in Mindanao, have also been murdered over recent decades.

The Philippine bishops have continued, with moderate effectivity, to use pastoral letters to communicate their holistic vision of the Church’s evangelizing mission. In the post-Vatican II era, the CBCP (Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, canonically

constituted in 1967) has issued 125+ pastoral letters and statements (1965-2000). Approximately two-thirds of these documents address social, political, and economic matters; Bishop Claver notes that they have generally proven to be quite accurate barometers of Philippine life. This effective tool of evangelization has promoted a basic Christian “faith-realism” and continually needs to be actualized within viable Christian communities.

The local Church retains moral authority and credibility in Philippine society; its witness to justice and solidarity with the poor, marginalized, and oppressed has established a reservoir of good will and credibility. Yet, as a living organism, she has clear limitations. There were unfortunate divisions in Church leadership, particularly in the mid-1970s; this resulted in missed pastoral opportunities and negative influences on the broader Church membership. Some bishops were hesitant to engage in human development programs and prophetic evangelization—especially during the early years of martial law. Although indigenous clergy and religious continue to increase, that growth rate is below the percentage of population increase; the priest-Catholic ratio is one of the lowest in the world. There is also a glaring inequitable distribution of apostolic personnel within the country; concentrations are usually found in urban areas.

Catechesis and Education

Given the large and rapidly expanding population of the Philippines (43 million in 1975 to 75.8 million in 2000 and to 100+ million in 2015), catechesis for Catholics remains a basic area of Church renewal. The catechetical ministry has shown considerable growth in vision, publications, institutes, and personnel. The Episcopal Commission on Catechesis and Catholic Education (ECCCE) has published several works and sponsored a variety of national workshops and congresses. Significant publications include: *The Shape of Religious Education in the Philippines* (1979), *National Catechetical*

Directory for the Philippines (1982-1985), *Filipino Family Growing in the Faith* (1983), *The Catechists’ Basic Formation Program* (1992), *Catholic Faith Catechism* (1989-1993), *Catechism for Filipino Catholics* (1997) [Tagalog translation *Katesismo para sa mga Pilipinong Katoliko* (2000)], and the *New Catechetical Directory of the Philippines* (2008). ECCCE used to publish a quarterly catechetical review, *Docete*, which has raised interest in and the quality level of catechesis throughout the country.

Significant catechetical congresses have been sponsored by ECCCE in the 1990s, beginning with the celebration of the National Catechetical Year (1990). Diocesan catechetical institutes have been established in major cities (e.g. Bacolod, Cebu, Davao, Iloilo, Manila, Naga, Vigan, etc.). Other national centers which prepare women and men for their vocation as catechists (e.g. Mother of Life Center, Metro Manila, established in 1967) continue their decades of service. The Philippine Constitution affords opportunities for religious education in public schools; this critical area of the catechetical ministry is limited by inadequate numbers of adequately formed catechists. The local Church is also quite unprepared to meet the new emphasis on ongoing and adult catechesis.

The Philippine Church has made a major commitment to formal education. It operates hundreds of high schools and grade schools as well as over 300 colleges and universities. The Catholic Educational Association of the Philippines (CEAP), founded in 1941, continues to represent the interests of Catholic educational institutions and promote religious instruction. Similar activities are the focus of the Association of Catholic Universities of the Philippines (ACUP), established in 1973.

A unique and successful form of religious education and renewal has evolved in the Philippine Church with the holding of large national congresses, dedicated to particular themes. Coming from all ecclesiastical circumscriptions, the delegates (often several

thousand) are expected to become trainer-facilitators upon their return home; audio and video tapes as well as printed materials of the congresses are made available. This approach proved particularly effective in the years connected with the Great Jubilee 2000. A partial list includes the following: Marian Year (1985), Eucharistic Year (1987), Bible Year (1989), Catechetical Year (1990), World Youth Day (1995), Eucharistic Congress (1997), two Holy Spirit Congresses (1998), Congress on God the Father (1999), Congress on the Trinity (2000), and the National Mission Congress (2000). The local Church of the Philippines hosted the Fourth World Meeting of Families in January, 2003. Finally, the Church also supports liturgical centers, radio stations, publishing houses, hospitals, and social action centers throughout its 80+ dioceses.

Learning – Teaching – Church

In 1995 the Bishops' Conference (CBCP) celebrated its fiftieth year since beginning in 1945 as the Catholic Welfare Organization (CWO). This became an opportunity to review and assess the CBCP's nature, structure, mission, and functions. The CBCP amended its constitution and by-laws; it established the new offices dedicated to media, legal matters, research, bioethics, women, and the Church's cultural heritage. The CBCP now (2020) has 35 departments, commissions, and offices to address the many concerns of this local Church. In addition, the bishops relaunched *The CBCP Monitor* in a new format, initiated a weekly radio program, and established the CBCP Website [<http://www.cbcponline.org>].

Responsive to the call for renewal in *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, the CBCP issued a series of exhaustive and in-depth pastoral exhortations, designed to address vital aspects of Philippine life and Christianity. Each document began with a quite thorough and substantive analysis of the carefully chosen topics: Philippine Politics (1997), Philippine Economy (1998), Philippine Culture (1999), and Philippine Spirituality (2000). The bishops concluded the series

with their document: "Missions" and the Church in the Philippines: A Pastoral Letter on the Church's Mission in the New Millennium (July 2000). The CBCP also sponsored the large National Mission Congress, which they saw as the "fitting culminating activity" of the Jubilee Year celebrations and the "first step as a local Church into the Third Millennium."

Additional Ministries

Dialogue and peace-building with a variety of partners remain a continuous commitment of the Philippine Church. She strove to be an instrument of reconciliation during the Marcos years; along with the National Council of Churches in the Philippines, she made several overtures to various leftist and armed groups. In their 1990 pastoral letter, *Seek Peace, Pursue It*, the bishops laid out a ten-point "path to peace." The Church also engages in interfaith dialogue with indigenous and Muslim peoples; the Silsilah movement and the pivotal Bishops-Ulama Forum (1996+) have fostered Muslim-Christian harmony in Southern provinces. The annual "Mindanao Week of Peace" was begun in 1999.

The Philippines has an impressive growing body of "local theology," often emerging from local communities discerning the "signs of the times" under the Holy Spirit's lead. Recurrent themes emerge: evangelization and mission, prayer and spirituality, peace-making and reconciliation, dialogue with peoples, cultures, and religious traditions, care for the environment, the Church and public policy. Several important theological, pastoral, catechetical, and mission journals are published; representative journals are: *Boletin Ecclesiastico de Filipinas*, *East Asian Pastoral Review* (ceased in 2016), *Landas*, *Philippiniana Sacra*, *Religious Life Asia*, and *World Mission*. Prominent among Filipino theologians are: C. Arévalo, T. Bacani, F. Claver, A. Co, B. Dianzon, F. Gustilo, D. Huang, A. Lagdameo, L. Legaspi, L. Mercado, O. Quevedo, L. Tagle, and G. Timoner III. Four of these theologians have

been appointed to the International Theological Commission (Arévalo, Tagle, Gustilo, and Timoner).

A definite sign of a vibrant local Church is its mission outreach. In mid-2000 Catholic Filipino missionaries numbered 1,329 women and 206 men from 69 religious congregations serving in some 80 countries. The bishops established the Mission Society of the Philippines (1965). Maryknoll founded the Philippine Catholic Lay Mission (1977). Cardinal Sin established the San Lorenzo Mission Institute (1987), whose goal is serving the Chinese; its patron is San Lorenzo Ruiz, the first Filipino saint, canonized on October 17, 1987. Pedro Calungsod, beatified on March 5, 2000 and canonized on October 21, 2012, inspired the successful National Mission Congress 2000. Several lay movements successfully engage in mission outreach (e.g. Knights of Columbus, Couples for Christ, *Gawad Kalinga*, *El Shaddai* movement, *Ligaya ng Panginoon*, and many others).

Continuing Renewal and Commitment

A major local Church milestone was achieved in the 1991 month-long Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP-II). After three years of intense preparation, a total of 504 participants (including 165 lay faithful) gathered for a comprehensive review and renewal of Christian life in the light of the vision of Vatican II. The Council boldly challenged the local Church to be “a *Community of Disciples, a Church of the Poor*, committed to the mission of *renewed integral evangelization*, toward building up of a new *civilization of life and love* in this land.” A systematic implementation scheme was elaborated in the National Pastoral Plan, *In the State of Mission: Towards a Renewed Integral Evangelization*, approved by the bishops on July 11, 1993.

Ten years later (January 2001) 369 delegates gathered for the National Pastoral Consultation on Church Renewal (NPCCR) and reflected on “how far we as a Church have fulfilled the grand vision and mission proposed by PCP-II and the National

Pastoral Plan.” The evaluation was both sober and hopeful: “The Church in the Philippines has, to our shame, ... remained unchanged in some respects; ... we, as Church, have to confess some responsibility for many of the continuing ills of Philippine society.... We rejoice, however, in the perseverance and increase of many movements of renewal; ... we hear anew God’s call to renewal.” NPCCR recommitted the Church to nine focused pastoral priorities for the first decade of the new millennium; they center on: faith, formation, laity, poor, family, community-building, clergy renewal, youth, ecumenism-dialogue, and *ad gentes* mission. These nine priorities have become the basis for a nine-year “novena” of renewal as the local Church prepares to celebrate the fifth centenary of evangelization of the Philippines (1521-2021). Each year from 2013-2021 is dedicated to catechesis and reflection on a particular theme; weekly reflections are published in *Sambuhay*, the widely distributed Sunday missalette; longer monthly articles appear in the *CBCP Monitor*.

Providentially, the NPCCR, as originally scheduled, took place during the week immediately following the “People Power II” events (January 16-20, 2001) that removed Joseph Estrada from the Philippine presidency after only a little over two years of his six-year term; Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo became the fourteenth president and the second woman to hold the highest office in the land. There was muted euphoria; the local Church had played a significant role; the event was described as “the gift of national and moral renewal which God empowered the Filipinos to receive.” The tasks ahead were clear: democratic institutions need strengthening; confidence in government awaits restoration; poverty beckons amelioration; the economy needs rebuilding. The Philippine Church’s commitment to “renewed integral evangelization” took on new depths and urgency.

Recalling the words of Pope John Paul II in *Novo Millennio Ineunte* where he quoted

Luke 5:4: *Duc in altum* (Put out into the deep), the NPCCR final statement asserts:

The challenge for us, the Church in the Philippines, is to do the same. We are called to put out into the depths of Philippine life and society, to put out into the depths of our life as Church, to put out our nets into the unknown depths of the future. Like Peter, we know the frustration of having caught nothing. But like Peter, we know that the One who directs us is the Lord who has renewed all things by his life, death, and resurrection. And so, we dare to begin again in the task of renewal. May Mary, star of evangelization, be with us in our journey to the new creation we so deeply desire.

Journeying in the Third Millennium

The local Church in the Philippines, as noted earlier, sponsored the successful National Mission Congress in 2000 as a programmatic “first step as a local Church into the Third Millennium.” This perspective continues the implementation of National Pastoral Plan that emerged from the Second Plenary Council: *In the State of Mission: Towards a Renewed Integral Evangelization*. In a word, *missionary evangelization* describes the dynamic, pastoral mission vision of the Philippine Church in its faith journey with the Filipino people.

The bishops’ conference (CBCP) continued catechizing the faithful through its frequent pastoral letters and the statements of the CBCP President. From 2000-2015 inclusive, 141 documents were released (an annual average of about nine). In the period of the third millennium, the CBCP Presidents were: Orlando Quevedo (1999-2003), Fernando Capalla (2003-2005), Angel Lagdameo (2005-2009), Nereo Odchimar (2009-2011), Jose Palma (2011-2013), and Socrates Villegas (2013-2017). In its history, the Philippines has had eight cardinals; their names and year of appointment are: Rufino Santos (1960), Julio Rosales (1969), Jaime Sin (1976), Ricardo Vidal (1985), Jose Sanchez (1991), Gaudencio Rosales (2006), Luis Antonio Tagle (2012), and Orlando

Quevedo (2014). As of this writing (late 2020), there are three living cardinals: G. Rosales, L. A. Tagle, and O. Quevedo; Tagle is still a papal elector. The Philippines has had four papal visits: Paul VI (1970), John Paul II (1981 and 1995), and Francis (2015). Some significant Church events in the first fifteen years of the new millennium can be briefly noted. The division of the huge Manila Archdiocese into six dioceses [Manila, Cubao, Kalookan, Novaliches, Pasig, and Parañaque] was begun in 2002 and completed in 2003. The Church held two highly successful national congresses of the clergy (2004 and 2010). The charity program to assist the poor (*Pondo ng Pinoy*) was established in 2005 by the then-archbishop of Manila, Gaudencio Rosales. There was strong participation from the Philippines in the First Asian Mission Congress, organized by the FABC and held in Chiang Mai, Thailand on October 18-23, 2006. The CBCP issued its second pastoral letter on the environment in 2008, commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the 1988 CBCP letter, *what is Happening to Our Beautiful Land?* (quoted in Pope Francis’ *Laudato Si’* no. 41). The Philippine Church hosted the Ninth Plenary FABC Assembly (August 10-16, 2009).

After several years of intense debate in which the Church took an active role, President Benigno Aquino III signed the much-contested Reproductive Health Bill into law on December 21, 2012. The Supreme Court took up various challenges to its constitutionality in 2013. On April 8, 2014, the Court affirmed the bill, but declared eight items (in sections 3, 7, 17, and 23) to be unconstitutional; these were, in fact, the main items to which the Church had serious objections. In this atmosphere CBCP President Villegas promoted renewed collaboration between the Church and the government for the welfare of the Filipino people.

The Philippines was visited by several natural calamities in the years 2012-2015. On December 4, 2012 Typhoon Bopha [local name: Pablo] devastated the provinces of

Davao Oriental and Compostella Valley in Eastern Mindanao. It was on October 15, 2013 that a severe earthquake hit in central Philippines; the island of Bohol was greatly affected. Typhoon Haiyan [local name: Yolanda] struck on November 8, 2013; affecting several provinces, it caused very severe destruction and resulted in the loss of over 7,000 lives. Extreme weather was also experienced in 2014-2015, bringing floods, crop destruction, loss of life, and much suffering. Church and civic resources were stretched to their limits; yet, it was also edifying to witness numerous and widespread examples of heroic generosity, dedication, service, and charity.

Though it is not possible to present a full description and specific data on many other Church events, one must mention in general a wide variety of constructive initiatives, as the Church continued its efforts at missionary evangelization: Congress for Seminary Formators (2009); Taize-sponsored "Pilgrimage of Trust" for youth (2010); annual gatherings of the AMRSP (Association of Major Religious Superiors of the Philippines); vigorous mission promotion by the Pontifical Mission Societies (PMS) that celebrated their eightieth year in the Philippines with a Grand Mission Festival (2012); exemplary faith witness of numerous Filipinos serving in foreign mission and the dedication of expatriate missionaries working in the Philippines; continued defense of the rights of the indigenous [*lumad*] peoples; the local and national efforts to strengthen the Basic Ecclesial Communities (BEC); catechetical and youth initiatives. Despite its recognized limitations, the local Church of the Philippines struggles to remain faithful to its mission of integral evangelization.

Visit of Pope Francis

Undeniably, the most significant Church event of 2015 was the January 15-19 pastoral visit of Pope Francis; he told the crowds that when he saw the destructive effects of the 2013 typhoon on television, he decided to come to comfort his brothers and sisters. Affectionately nicknamed *Lolo Kiko*

(Grandfather Francis) by the huge crowds, he won their hearts and souls. He emphatically asserted: "The poor are at the center of the Gospel, are at the heart of the Gospel; if we take away the poor from the Gospel, we cannot understand the whole message of Jesus Christ." The most moving part of the papal visit was Pope Francis' presence in Tacloban, the city hardest hit by the 2013 typhoon. Thanking Pope Francis for his pastoral visit, Cardinal Tagle captured the people's sentiments and mission commitment; he said: "Every Filipino wants to go with you—not to Rome—but to the peripheries, to the shanties, to prison cells, to hospitals, to the world of politics, finance, arts, sciences, culture, education and social communications. We will go to these worlds to bring the light of Jesus, Jesus who is the center of your pastoral visit and the cornerstone of the Church."

Eucharistic Congresses

The Philippine Church was privileged to have been selected to host the fifty-first International Eucharistic Congress (IEC) in 2016 in Cebu City. This is the second time the country has hosted the IEC; the thirty-third IEC was held in Manila on February 3-7, 1937. The local Church has held five National Eucharistic Congresses: (1) Manila (December 11-15, 1929); (2) Manila (November 28-December 2, 1956); (3) Cebu (April 25-May 3, 1965); (4) Manila (December 4-8, 1987) [1987 was a National Eucharistic Year]; (5) Manila (January 22-26, 1997). A special Archdiocesan Eucharistic Congress was held in Manila on February 8-11, 1962 in commemoration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the thirty-third IEC. The local Church fully ascribes to the dictum: The Church makes the Eucharist, and the Eucharist makes the Church.

Looking to the Future

The Philippine Church has embarked on a nine-year journey in preparation for the fifth centenary of Christianity in the Islands (1521-2021). In a lengthy pastoral exhortation on the New Evangelization

issued in 2012, the CBCP once again promoted missionary evangelization as a fundamental commitment of the local Church; the scope of the document is impressive; it is a clear roadmap for the coming years. We can be inspired by some brief quotes:

We look forward with gratitude and joy to March 16, 2021, the fifth centenary of the coming of Christianity to our beloved land.... We shall, therefore, embark on a nine-year spiritual journey that will culminate with the great jubilee of 2021. It is a grace-filled event of blessing for the Church.... The mission of all of us who are called to take part in the “New Evangelization” is the Church’s own essential mission, as it was the mission of Jesus Himself also....

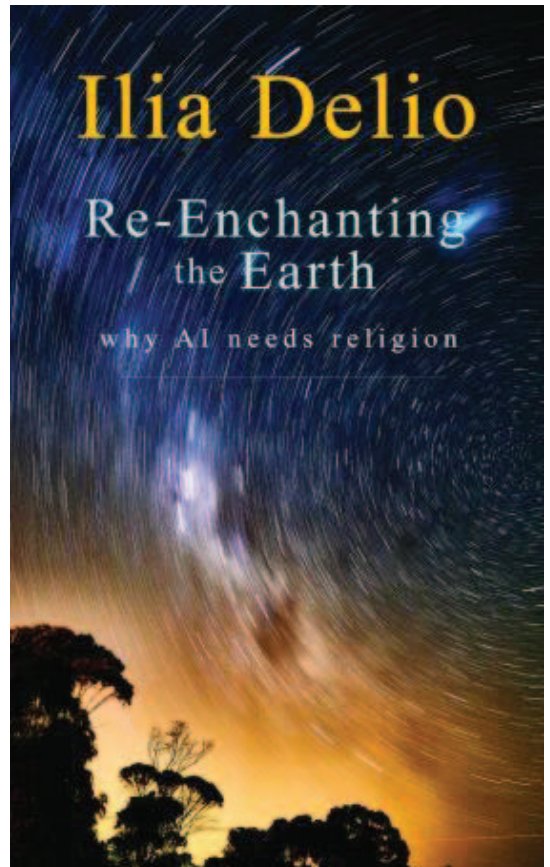
Concern with the New Evangelization has been the overall theme of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP-II) in 1991, of the National Mission Congress for the New Millennium (NMC) held in Cebu in September/October 2000, and of the National Pastoral Consultation on Church Renewal (NPCCR) which the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) sponsored in Manila in 2001.... Thus, we in the Church in the Philippines come to this program of the “New Evangelization” already with considerable prior extensive and intensive study, reflection, deliberation and resolution. In truth, we have been trying to earnestly pursue “renewed evangelization” especially in the last twenty-five years....

We respond to the call of the Spirit for a New Evangelization by focusing on the Nine Pastoral Priorities of the Church in the Philippines as the key themes over a nine-year period [2013: Integral Faith Formation; 2014: Laity; 2015: The Poor; 2016: Eucharist and the Family; 2017: Parish as a Communion of Communities;

2018: Clergy and Religious; 2019: Youth; 2020: Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue; 2021: Missio ad gentes]....

Dear Friends, being evangelizers is not a privilege but a commitment that comes from faith...Beloved People of God, we invite you to pray and reflect on what the New Evangelization asks of all of us, from each of us.... In this Year of Faith and throughout the nine-year period of special New Evangelization — and beyond — let us celebrate our faith. Live Christ! Share Christ!

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