

Columban Missionaries
Philippines

GIFTED TO GIVE

Growing in

STATURE

and

WISDOM

500 YEARS OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE PHILIPPINES



LOVE



GROW



SERVE

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FOREWORD



We are deeply grateful to the Lord for the gift of faith we have received as we celebrate 500 Years of Christianity in the Philippines. We give thanks for the various missionaries who were courageous enough to bring the faith to us. Though so much over-shadowed by the dark history of colonization, still the Light of Faith has been born in us as a people. Hence, we too give thanks to our forebears who received the faith, lived it, and transmitted it to us until the present. We are grateful too, to our ancestors, the indigenous peoples; the first recipients of the Gospel.

In particular, we thank the Columban Missionaries whose zeal and passion for the mission we all can attest. This book, ***“GROWING IN STATURE AND WISDOM: 500 YEARS OF CHIRSTIANITY IN THE PHILIPPINES,”*** recounts their missionary endeavors etched in the history of the Philippine Church as it grows in stature and wisdom. They are one of the active agents of evangelization here and they have witnessed how the Philippine Church has grown. They help nurture that little seed of faith planted in the hearts of us all. Like the infant Jesus, the Santo Niño, we too have grown in stature and wisdom by God’s grace.

The Columban missionaries, following God’s command to Moses, also “take off their shoes for they are entering a sacred ground” (Exodus 3:5). Learning from history, they know that mission is accomplished not by conquest but by solidarity and inculturation. They immerse themselves in the life and culture of the communities where they are sent. Our word for immersion is, *“babad sa Dios, babad sa kinabuhi, sa tawo ug babad sa tibuok kamugnaan.”* Being with the people, they proclaim the Word through constant catechesis, the formation and upbuilding of Basic Christian Communities/Basic Ecclesial Communities, promoting the dignity of each person and their integral development. They too are at the forefront of responding to the cry of the earth, telling us to care for the *“Umahan Namo nga iya sa Amahan”*. They promote Dialogue with other faiths and religions as a way towards peace and harmony. They, indeed, help to nurture that seed of faith into a vibrant one which does justice, both social and ecological.

Pope Francis’ call towards synodality at this time is demonstrated by the example of the mission of the Columban Missionaries in our midst – walking hand in hand together as one family, lay, consecrated persons and clergy, actively fulfilling the mission entrusted to us by the Triune God.

May the God of Wisdom continue to enlighten them and keep that fire burning in their hearts as they spread the Gospel of Love, Peace, and Justice.

Archbishop Jose Cabantan, DD
Arcdiocese of Cagayan de Oro

A Time to Keep and a Time to Discard

[Ecclesiastes: 3:6]

This year, 2021, the Philippine Church is celebrating 500 years since the arrival of Christianity. On March 31, 1521 Ferdinand Magellan and his fleet moored at Limasawa Island (Leyte), at the time part of the outlying territory of the Rajahnate (Kingdom) of Butuan (Northern Mindanao). According to the fleet's chronicler, the first Catholic Mass was celebrated in the Philippines that day by the fleet's chaplain, Padre Pedro Valderrama. It was Easter Sunday. From there the fleet proceeded to Cebu, where Rajah Humabon, his consort Humamay, his wives and a number of his subjects were baptized. A statue of the Infant Jesus, the Santo Niño, was presented to Humamay to mark the occasion. Unfortunately for Magellan, he made the fatal decision of getting enmeshed in a local dispute by agreeing to help Rajah Humabon defeat his rival Lapulapu. In the ensuing battle Magellan was unceremoniously slain by Lapulapu's forces. Rather than achieving his aim of circumnavigating the world and returning to the Spanish king with ship-loads of highly coveted spices from the Malocas Islands, he was buried in Cebu and the rest of his crew completed the voyage back to Spain.

Even though some historians claim that other missionaries said mass in the Philippines before 1521, tradition has it that the Easter Sunday Eucharist that took place on Limasawa Island on March 31, 1521 marked the arrival of Christianity in the Philippines. The Santo Niño statue which was given to Humamay in 1521 was subsequently rediscovered by Miguel Lopez de Legaspi's fleet when they arrived back in Cebu in 1565 as part of the mission to colonize and evangelize what had already come to be known as Las Islas Filipinas; named in honor of the new King of the Spanish Empire, Felipe II. To this day Santo Niño takes pride of place in Cebu and has come to symbolize the Catholic faith in the Philippines; a faith that continues to endure despite everything.

In his letter at the beginning of this year's (2021) celebration the acting bishop of Manila, Bishop Broderick Pabillo, points out that: "Although the Cross of the faith had come with the Sword of the conquistadores in the time of colonialism, through time the Filipinos have learned to distinguish between the Christian faith and the Spanish colonialism. We had fought against the Spanish masters and drove them out but we have remained fervent in our fidelity to the Catholic Church".

(<https://cbcnews.net/cbcnews/500-years-of-christianity/>)

"This is a time to celebrate the great vibrancy of faith and commitment to the Gospel of tens of millions of Filipinos here and all over the world."



*by Paul Glynn
Regional Director*



Palm Sunday celebration, Our Lady of Remedies Parish, Malate

This is indeed a time to celebrate; yet it is also a time for us to mourn the injustices of the past, to learn from the mistakes of history and to redouble our resolve to do what is fitting to right the wrongs and heal the wounds of colonialism. This is a time to celebrate the great vibrancy of faith and commitment to the Gospel of tens of millions of Filipinos here and all over the world. It is a time to be grateful for how the values of the Gospel of Jesus have endured for 500 years despite being historically so enmeshed with colonial oppression. Commitment to the Gospel has strengthened the people of this archipelago to stand up to corrupt dictators, to practice immense resiliency in the face of all sorts of natural disasters, calamities, wars and conflicts and to endure the worst forms of poverty, hardship and injustice. Once evangelized by Spanish friars, Filipinos are the new face of the missionaries who answer the call to proclaim the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

Yet, as we celebrate 500 years of Christianity, we also need to seriously reflect on where the values of the Gospel have not yet fully taken root in our own lives and in the life of Philippine society as a whole. Why, in the third most Catholic country in the world and the only majority Christian country in Asia, is there still so much poverty, inequality, exploitation of workers, of women and children, violation of basic human rights, injustice and corruption? Why is there still misunderstanding and distrust between our diverse communities? Why are we so remiss in caring for the oceans, rivers, forests, flora and fauna of this, our beautiful land? This is a time for us to celebrate our 500 years of commitment to Christianity; but it is also a time to mourn our immense shortcomings in order to renew our resolve to be ever more faithful to the Gospel of Christ into the future.



Growing in Stature and Wisdom

by Finbar Maxwell
Rector of Formation



2021 marks the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Christianity in the Philippines. This is a good opportunity for the Philippine Church to reflect on its experience of faith, both personally and collectively, as that faith has grown over this long time. It is a time for Columbans to reflect on our participation in that faith journey, since the Society first arrived in the Philippines in 1929. For all of us in the Columban formation house in Cubao, students and staff alike, this is a timely occasion for us to reflect on our growth in and our understanding of faith and Columban vocation.

As we reflect on 500 years of Christianity in the Philippines, we Columbans have chosen as a theme a passage taken from the Gospel of Luke 2:52 ~ “And Jesus grew up in wisdom and stature.” This would appear to be an appropriate verse to reflect on, since 500 years ago when Christianity was first introduced to the Philippines by Spanish explorers led by Ferdinand Magellan, his gift to Rajah Humabon of Cebu and his chief consort, on the occasion of their baptism in 1521, was the small, ornately dressed statue of the child Jesus, carved from wood in the Flemish style, which came to be known as the *Santo Niño*, and subsequently became the symbol of faith of the Philippine Church to this day. The symbol of a holy child

would seem to be an appropriate symbol for a Church at the beginning of its life. Yet in the same way that babies leave the cradle and grow, through the stages of childhood and adolescence into adulthood, so too must our faith grow. Just as we grow physically, chronologically and psychologically, something corresponding to this growth should also be happening in the faith and meaning-making part of our lives – if our faith is truly something that is important to us, something we take seriously, and something we make a conscious effort to develop throughout our lives.

I think it would be accurate to say that the image of the *Santo Niño* represents a very early stage of faith (infancy to age 15). However, we need to be aware that there are still lots of deepening avenues and expanding adventures yet to come in our faith, if we, as individuals and as communities, are open and willing to go and grow there. The line from the Gospel of Luke 2:52, gives us a sense of how Jesus himself made this evolutionary leap of faith in his own life, and how

he teaches us to do the same: to embrace our faith in a very grounded and community-relational way; and in such a way that we too **grow up** in wisdom and stature.

Let us look at what was happening in Jesus’s life at this time. In the passage preceding Luke 2:52, Jesus had been on pilgrimage with his parents and other relatives in Jerusalem, for the Feast of Passover.



Santo Niño de Cebu

They were actually on the journey back to Nazareth when Jesus decided to stay on in Jerusalem. We know from the story how Mary and Joseph noticed that Jesus was not with them, or with their relatives, and how in a state of frantic worry they returned the way they came to look for him. Three fraught and no doubt exhausting days later, they found Jesus in the temple, discussing matters of faith with the religious scholars and doctors of the law. We sense the relief in their voices when they found him, but also an edge of anger and worry at how he could do this to them – wandered off without concern for how worried and upset they would be. The response of Jesus is quite astonishing though: **“Did you not know that I must be about my Father’s business?”** At this point we are told that Jesus then returned home to Nazareth with his parents, lived under their authority, increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.

A point of transition had been reached after Jesus’ pilgrim visit to Jerusalem. Jesus was no longer the same as he was before they had set out. Something had changed, had awakened in him; a greater sense of who he was, a deeper sense of his relationship with God, and a crucial understanding that the future direction of his life would be organized around the “business” of God. Jesus had, in short, come of age. He was no longer a child. At a time that would likely have been around his Bar Mitzvah, Jesus had now, technically and symbolically speaking, left his childhood, left the cradle, and became a man. In other words, Jesus **grew up**.

We are called to respond maturely and courageously to the signs of the times

Upon his return to Nazareth after that time in Jerusalem, Jesus disappeared from our view until the time of his baptism in the Jordan, at about thirty years of age. It would be of immense value to spend some hours in meditative prayer, imagining what Jesus was like in those intervening years, between approximately thirteen and thirty. We can be sure that he grew in maturity, in practical life skills, in relationships, in wisdom, in faith and in a sense of how his whole life would be lived, in relation to God. From this point on, each of the Gospels, in their areas of convergence and divergence, opens up to us the life of Jesus over the next three years; years of public ministry that would bring him to his violent death at Calvary, and to his subsequent resurrection and ascension. But the important point for us to reflect on here is that Jesus grew up and grew into what his faith and his call held for him. In their own stumbling way, his disciples did likewise.

This is the invitation to us as people of faith; to grow and deepen in our relationship with God. The attempt to grow in wisdom and stature – in each of the faith and life stages we are in, is both a challenge and an adventure. Of course, we will never be ‘perfect’, in fact, perfection, if it ever comes, will be at the end of the journey – or maybe after it’s over! But the focus is not perfection, rather it’s simply to live and to grow, to not settle for being infants – or *infantile* – in our faith, or in the other parts of our lives. We are called to be responsible to and with each other, and to help each other in this movement towards growth. We do this personally and as a community, individually and as a Church. We are called to respond maturely and courageously to the *signs of the times*.



Source: <https://www.jw.org/en/library/books/jesus/events-up-to-jesus-ministry/life-in-nazareth/>

“Jesus increased in wisdom and age, and in divine and human favor”

Luke 2: 52

A faith that has failed to grow up remains childishly afraid in the face of the challenges, problems and evils that beset our country and our world. As we mark 500 years of Christianity in the Philippines, we celebrate the ways in which our faith in Christ has grown up and come of age – how it has learned to respond confidently and courageously, in the face of injustice, greed and conflict, with acts of justice, truth and compassion. We give thanks to God for the ways in which this maturing faith has gradually been able to shake off the shackles of its colonial past and has developed the confidence to stand firmly with Jesus of Nazareth and the values he teaches, in affirming and protecting human dignity and the integrity and the rights of all peoples and of all of God’s creation.

As Philippine Church reflects on 500 years of faith, it is a time to give thanks. It’s a time to look back, a time to take stock of where we are at this present moment and a time to look towards where we are called to be into the future. This is an opportunity to reflect on where we are yet to grow, to further mature and move forward together in faith in the years ahead. Let us do so with courage, attention, intention, and with joy-filled hearts.



GROWING AWAY FROM CONQUEST AND DIVISION

Towards Reconciliation and Solidarity

by Paul Glynn
Regional Director

The Spanish colonizers brought the Catholic faith to the Philippines, where it continues to survive after 500 years. The Apostolic Administrator of the Archdiocese of Manila, Bishop Pabillo, has pointed out that: “Filipinos have learned to distinguish between the Christian faith and the Spanish colonialism.” (<https://cbcnews.net/cbcnews/500-years-of-christianity/>) In other words, while Gospel of Christ with its message of universal love, justice and equality reached our shores 500 years ago, it came as it were as a gift that was ‘wrapped’ with colonial values that were very much in conflict with the values that this gift of the Gospel contain. The events that brought Christianity to our shores also brought much division and injustice. In a sense, these colonizers brought the illnesses (of discrimination, division, conflict and injustice) while they were also bringing cures for these illnesses (Gospel values).

CONQUEST

Unlike countries such as Korea and Russia, where Christianity was largely introduced by the locals themselves, or like Ireland and Scandinavia, where the Catholic missionaries were non-threatening and highly respectful towards the local culture, the story of Christianity in the Philippines is, unfortunately, much like that in most countries colonized by European imperial powers. The cross accompanied the sword and the cannon. Magellan engaged in bloody combat less than a month after his chaplain had said the first mass in the Philippines and was killed in the process. When, in 1565, Miguel Lopez de Legaspi, together with Spanish 500 troops and seven Augustinian missionaries arrived in Cebu to colonize and evangelize they opened fire on the Rajahnate (Kingdom), burning 1,500 homes and killing over 500 locals. It was only when the colonizers went searching in the charred remains of what had been the Rajahnate that they found the *Santo Niño* undamaged by the attack.

From Cebu, Legaspi’s colonizing and evangelizing expedition moved to Manila, where they subdued by sword and cannon the Muslim Rajah leaders, burning down their wooden fortresses and replacing them with a stone fortress dedicated to *Santiago Matamoros* (i.e.: Saint James, the patron saint of conquests over the Muslim Moors). Alas, along with Christianity, the Spanish colonizers had brought with them a deep suspicion towards Muslims. It had only been in the year 1492 that Queen Isabela and King Ferdinand had created a united Christian kingdom in Spain by expelling the Muslim Moors from the country. To this day, Filipino Muslims are commonly called ‘*Moros*’ (Moors), a legacy of how the Spanish colonizers regarded them as being much the same as their arch-enemies back in Spain. An early indication of the colonizers’ dislike of Islam was the fate of the son of Rajah Soliman, one of the Muslim leaders in Manila. This boy had been forcibly adopted and baptized by Legaspi (and given the baptismal name of Agustin de Legaspi). When his mother died, he showed his respect by organizing an Islamic funeral for her (as, after all, she was a Muslim). When the Spanish authorities heard of this, they had him imprisoned for treason. When he eventually broke free and retaliated against those who had incarcerated

him, he was executed. Loyalty to the king of Spain demanded adherence to the king's religion. Any refusal to embrace the religion of the king of Spain was regarded as treason.

DIVISION

In order to be more effective in both evangelizing and colonizing the over 7,000 islands making up the Philippines the Spanish colonial officials and missionary friars introduced the *reduccion* system: meaning that wherever the missionary friars had built their mission stations and churches, baptized Filipinos were urged to settle around these structures and form urban settlements. Such settlements became the *poblacion* (town) replete with a church plaza and colonial administrative buildings. In many cases, the friars were also expected to be the local colonial administrators. In fairness to these colonizers and missionaries, it needs to be acknowledged that by the time the colonization of the Philippines took place many of the colonial reforms for which Bartholemé De Las Casas O.P. had agitated were already being promoted by King Felipe II. Added to this, the first bishop of Manila, Domingo Salazar O.P, was a disciple of De Las Casas and did much to try to ensure that the reforms were implemented in the Philippines. Slavery was effectively abolished (yet subjects of the king were expected to offer their labor, free of charge, for various colonial activities, including army duty) and missionaries were expected to learn the local language and respect cultural traditions. For this reason, Filipinos continued to use their own languages rather than Spanish.



Santiago Matamoros (by Larry Duerme)

In due time, the *reduccion* system would have the effect of transforming Philippine society into three fairly distinct groups: lowland Christian Filipinos, Indigenous Peoples and Muslims.

1) Those who (at least publicly) renounced their ancestral beliefs and were baptized into the Catholic Church and urged to live within the colonial *poblacion* became what we refer to today as the lowland Christian Filipinos. This is by far the majority of the population today. While the lowland Filipinos were required to form the back-bone of the Spanish colonial enterprise by providing their labor and serving in the colonial army expeditions, over the 333 years of Spanish rule, many also resisted colonialism and rebelled against Spanish abuses. With the arrival of the Americans in 1898, these lowlanders would be the first to benefit from the US colonial education system and would go on to dominate almost all government positions in the new Independent Republic.

2) Those who continued to practice their ancestral beliefs and cultural ways of life rather than embrace the new colonial religion came to comprise the ethno-linguistic groups who collectively refer to themselves today as the Indigenous Peoples of the Philippines. The populations who share this common identity as Indigenous Peoples are ethno-linguistically highly diverse and scattered throughout the archipelago. What their belief systems tend to hold in common is an intense affinity and respect for the natural environments in which they live. They were variously referred to by the Spanish colonizers as *infeles* (infidels) and 'wild tribes' in accounts by American colonizers. Since the arrival of the Americans until now, increasing numbers of Indigenous Peoples have converted to Christianity (both Protestant and Catholic), while many hold on to their traditional beliefs and practices. American colonization ushered in a new era of rapid deforestation of the vast mountain ranges for commercial purposes. With the unceasing incursion of a steadily growing population of (Christian) lowlanders into their ancestral lands, many

Indigenous Peoples choose to move higher and higher into the mountains. This often results in being farther and farther removed from basic government services, such as education. Not only are Indigenous Peoples' lands being increasingly taken from them as mining companies from as far as China, Australia and Canada denude the rainforests in an endless search for minerals, sadly, these diverse ethno-linguistic groups continue to be discriminated against and are often labelled 'ignorant', 'uneducated' and 'uncivilized'. I will always remember an incident I witnessed first-hand while attending a public concert in a town with a large minority of Indigenous *Subaanens*. When it was announced that a *Subaanen* group would perform a cultural dance the comments I heard from the lowland Christians varied from: "Here come the monkeys down from the forest" to "cover your noses from the smell of these ignorant tribesmen!" Divisions and stigmas, once planted by centuries of colonialization, are very hard to up-root.

3) Islam had been practiced in the Philippines since the 14th century when it was introduced by missionaries from Malaysia and Indonesia and was well established throughout the archipelago by the time Christianity arrived, particularly in Mindanao and Sulu. Those who practiced Islam had no interest in swapping their familiar faith and way of life for a religion that was foreign and incomprehensible to them. This refusal to embrace the religion of the king of Spain was regarded as high treason. To this day Muslims are often suspected by Christians of being treacherous and are often labelled with the Spanish term *traydor* (traitor). One of the obligations of being a baptized male subject of the king was that, at any time, you were expected to join the colonial military expeditions that were frequently organized to try to subjugate the fairly sophisticated sultanates of these 'treacherous' Muslim 'infidels'. Sadly, over the centuries of bloody encounters between the Spanish colonial armies and the ever-defiant Muslim forces, ordinary Filipino Muslims and ordinary Filipino Christian lowlanders (army recruits) who faced each other in battle came to regard each other as arch-enemies. I often hear Visayan Christians recall that as children, the narrative often used by their parents and grandparents to prevent them from wandering outside at night was to warn them: 'Don't wander outside the house in the dark because you will be snatched away by the *Moros*, put into a sack, taken off to Marawi and forced to plant ginger!' The same colonial evangelizers who had brought the Gospel of peace, fraternity and universal love to the Philippines had also brought with it the seeds of division, discrimination, conflict and mutual suspicion.

TOWARDS RECONCILIATION AND SOLIDARITY

In 1975, at the request of Pope Paul VI, the Prelature of Marawi (homeland of the *Meranao* Muslims) was established in order that a community of Christians living in this overwhelmingly Muslim part of Mindanao would be a reconciling presence and a means to building bridges of friendship and trust in the midst of a climate of mutual suspicion and animosity. It was during a particularly violent period in the history of relations between Christians and Muslims in Mindanao that Bishop Benny Tuftud, and a group of Columbans and other missionaries and lay people took up this challenge. This work of Dialogue of Life and Faith was rightly regarded as a Gospel imperative. How could we proclaim that Christ is our Peace and not do something to try to help bring peace to a war-torn Mindanao? After centuries of division, mistrust and conflict between Christians and Muslims, our faith in the One God/Allah demanded that we work together towards reconciliation. Among the Columbans, Rufus Halley volunteered to work in a Muslim store and immerse himself in the *Meranao* Muslim language and culture. Kevin McHugh worked tirelessly to ensure that the two Catholic schools in Marawi Prelature would be venues for building friendship and understanding among future generations of the Muslim and Christian students who attended them. Des Hartford and then Terry Twohig lived with *Meranao* Muslim families, in much the same way as Rufus did. I had the privilege, some-time later, of being able to do the same myself over the course of many

years, as well as being part of a team of Christians and Muslims who conduct peace-building workshops for communities experiencing inter-ethno-religious conflict. This immersion in the lives, language and culture of the *Meranao* Muslims has been with the sole aim of facilitating peaceful relations between the Christian and Muslim communities in Mindanao. We missionaries have merely been catalysts for healing and reconciliation between these communities.



Columbans Paul Glynn (left) and Enrique Escobar (second from right) join other members of the Interfaith Forum for Peace, Harmony and Solidarity, Cagayan de Oro

In more recent years Columban priests and lay missionaries continue to be at the forefront of various initiatives for building greater friendship, mutual understanding and solidarity between Christians, Muslims and Indigenous Peoples. Enrique Escobar, Lanie Tamatawale, Latai Muller, Mereani Nailevu and others continue our Columban involvement in the Cagayan de Oro Interfaith Forum for Peace, Harmony and Solidarity. Rex Rocamora has plans to learn the *Meranao* Muslim language and immerse himself in their culture so as to be a reconciling presence in the continuing efforts to break down the centuries-old walls of mutual mistrust.

Sean Martin relates that one of the fruits of Vatican II was the insight to recognize that the Indigenous *Subaanen* are a dignified people who were not just there to be baptized and assimilated into the Visayan Lowland Catholic culture. He recalls that the Columban Sisters learned the *Subaanen* language and lived and worked with the *Subaanen*. Sr. Winnie Apao continues to do so today. Bishop Tony Tobias of Pagadian spent time with the Columban Sisters and incorporated some *Subaanen* symbols into the baptism ceremony. Brendan Kelly has likewise learned the *Subaanen* language and continues to be immersed in their culture and way of life to this day. Donie O’Dea did likewise with the Aeta Indigenous People in Zambales, Luzon for many years. We Columbans (among countless others) have learned from the Indigenous Peoples of the Philippines that the environment needs to be cared for. In various locations around the archipelago, we have been able to partner with diverse Indigenous Peoples communities in the re-forestation of their ancestral lands.

The events that first brought Christianity to our shores also brought much division, discrimination, sowing the first seeds of conflict between the Christians, Muslims and Indigenous Peoples in the Philippines. Until such time as the deep wounds of these divisions and conflicts are fully healed and these injustices are righted, the process of truly Christianizing the Philippines will not yet be complete. Thankfully, there are countless Filipino Christians, Muslims and Indigenous Peoples who are committed to working together to make that happen. May our One God continue to inspire them to do so!



Subaanen Ministry, Our Lady of Lourdes Mission Station, Don Victoriano Chiongbian, Misamis Occidental, Mindanao



The Influence of Sto Niño

IN MY FORMATION JOURNEY

by *Elbert Balbastro*

Deacon, Missionary Society of St. Columban

The 500 years celebration of Christianity in the Philippines is a momentous event that needs to be celebrated and remembered. This commemoration is a good time for the reckoning of insights, graces, and faith that our ancestors cultivated, and passed on to. From the articles and news that I read about this centenary occasion, the image of the Sto. Niño stands out to me. As an Illongo who grew up as a devotee, I always see the icon at home, in the market, in business offices, restaurants or even malls. Sto. Niño has always been there guiding me, so I give thanks to God for all the gifts he bestowed on me especially in my seminary formation.

Formation in the seminary takes time, effort, and hard work. I remember entering the Columban House of Studies in 2012 and felt like I was so far from the finish line. As time went by, I realized that it is not about reaching the finish line that matters the most, but savouring the journey along the way. It is all worth it for my personal and spiritual growth and the awareness of God's love in me. After nine years of participating in prayer life, community life, apostolate work, and study, I have been formed and molded into someone ready to commit and offer his life for the sake of the mission. Reflecting on my formation journey in relation to the 500 years celebration of Christianity in the Philippines, draws me the statue of the Sto. Niño because it feels like meeting Him again. According to history, the statue of the boy Jesus was a baptismal *gift* to Humaway, the chief wife of *Rajah* Humabon. Of all the material things that Magellan and his group brought, I asked myself, "Why give the image of the Sto. Niño?"

Thereafter, I realized the importance of the symbol that it represents. Sto. Niño is an image that best represents my journey as a Columban. The Child Jesus depicted in the statue reminds me of the childlike attitude that I need to cultivate as a seminarian. A child's heart is sincere and generous. At the same time his mind is open to learning. Years of immersing myself in the seminary formation made me inculcate several essential values in the long run.

I was taught that like the boy Jesus, I need to be reformed, to have a deeper faith in God, and a wider understanding of mission. After all, I cannot minister to people and share the joy of the gospel to others if I am not equipped with the knowledge and awareness of the presence of God in my life. It would be like the blind leading the blind. Furthermore, the virtue of humility is an important quality. Knowing



when to apologize, being able to recognize the aspects of our life we are ignorant about, and recognizing our strengths and weaknesses developed me into a person who is in touch with the reality of life.

In my journey, there were times when academic studies were demanding and difficult. There were moments when academic papers overwhelmed me and I was at a loss for ideas. However, openness to learn aided me in refining my motivation to be a missionary priest. My studies are not only for my personal interests, it is also dedicated to the people of my future ministry.

Open-mindedness is one of the values I developed in formation. I remember working in the prison and hospital ministries and being confronted with difficult questions. Why do God let these people suffer? Where is the hand of God in the tragedies of their life? As much as I would like to answer them, I am not a messiah, I do not bear the knowledge that could give them sufficient answers. What I could only do, at their times of distress was to be a companion, a brother, friend or pilgrim.

Love always comes from within and from that wellspring, it will overflow to others. I cannot love someone if I do not know how to love and forgive myself. Love is inclusive. My Fist Mission Assignment (FMA) in Pakistan taught me that every person has dignity and deserves to be loved even though they belong to the lower caste. As a missionary, I must be capable of love for all people regardless of race, color of skin, gender, religion, and culture and for all beings created.

As an ordained deacon, my eyes are open to a wider perspective of God's mission. Mission involves not merely giving but also receiving insights and the goodness of the people. Further "giving" also involves being present in the life of people in the ministry, rather than just the dole-out form. The best gift I could give in the mission is my effort to reach out to people with love and compassion, to advocate protection for the environment, and to promote equality and peace through mutual respect and dialogue. My faith gets nourished by my burning desire and commitment to encounter God and it is through my daily encounters with people that I meet Jesus. Sometimes, I find myself in doubt or lacking in my knowledge of God, but all I have to do is look at the statue of the Sto. Niño and draw inspiration from it.

The statue of the Sto. Niño has always influenced me in my formation journey, as it had guided my ancestors to grow in their faith when they first received the statue 500 years ago. Now that I have completed my formation journey in the seminary and have embarked on a new one, it is time for me to give. I could only do that through my loving presence and my lifelong commitment to the service of God, His people and all of creation. As Pope Francis said, "Faith is passed on by contact, from one person to another, just as one candle is lighted from another."



Elbert Balbastro (left photo) together with Columban Fathers (right photo) Pat Raleigh (L), Tomas King (R) and Pakistani Parishioners



**LEARNING FROM THE WISDOM
OF THE ORDINARY PEOPLE**

Sean Martin



LEARNING TO CARE FOR THE EARTH

Vincent Busch

Ministries



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Brian Gore



**ECUMENICAL ENDEAVORS
TO MARK 500 YEARS OF CHRISTIANITY**

Cireneo Matulac



LEARNING FROM THE WISDOM OF THE ORDINARY PEOPLE

by Sean Martin

Liloan Parish, Archdiocese of Ozamis

Vatican II was in its infancy when I was ordained in 1974. I was assigned to Ozamiz City (Mindanao) with five other Columbans to learn the Binisaya language so as to be able to preach the Gospel. There was great hope at the time that the Gospel would relieve the suffering of the poor and the oppressed. My work in the parish involved celebrating the sacraments and setting up small shop-like co-operatives so that people could buy their supplies cheaper. This was long, slow work trying to encourage co-operation. *Hunlos* (a system of farming households helping each other in the most important seasonal agricultural and village activities) and *alalayan* (the struggling members of the community being supported by the more blessed) were being practiced in the *barangays* (villages), with various rules at play depending on the needs of the farmers and the group.

At that time, I never expected that part of the Gospel message would involve me being the one to be evangelized. The Mindanao Sulu Pastoral Conference (MSPC) was the main instrument for enabling Vatican II to be honed to the needs of the church in Mindanao. *Alay Kapwa* (Lenten collection campaign in churches for the alleviation of poverty through livelihood projects, community organizing, etc.) and *Duyog Ramadan* (initiatives to encourage Catholics to be in solidarity with their Muslim neighbors during Ramadan) became energetic parts of preaching the gospel because of a new realization of who could be saved and how; since Vatican II was changing our understanding of how salvation came about. Other cultures, denominations and religions were to be seen as partners. The work of Dialogue with Islam in Marawi took on new

significance and importance.

Indigenous Peoples - especially the Subaanen for us Columbans - were now being recognized as a group of people who were not just to be baptized and assimilated into the Visayan (Catholic) culture. In 1979, I was assigned to Midsalip where over half the population were Subaanen or part Subaanen. The logging of the rainforest trees was happening on a massive scale there. There was a good Parish Council set up by Columbans, Jack Bartlett and Vinney Hindmarsh. It was well organized in that each church had two representatives. The town had two churches so there were only four representatives. This meant that the influential people from the town could not bully those from the rural churches. They were now in the minority. In 1982 the logging company asked to have their new camp in Bibilop blessed. The matter was discussed in the Parish Pastoral Council. People in the town were in favor. Those in the outlying villages asked: "If destroying nature is a sin, how can you bless a sinful activity?" May 1 was the day set for the blessing and the workers were invited for a Mass in the church. The camp was not to be blessed. No workers came to Mass. This caused a bit of a storm and the logging company said that they would get another priest to bless the camp. At the meeting of Priests, Sisters and Lay People in Pagadian on the next month the matter was presented and it was requested that no other priest would over-ride the decision of our Parish Pastoral Council. This gave encouragement to the people who were aware that indiscriminate logging was destructive of people's livelihoods.

The Columban Sisters came to Midsalip and were learning the Subaanen language in Lumpunid,



Original group of Columban Sisters assigned for Dialogue with the Subaanens (L-R) Sisters Mary McManus, Sally Oyson, Kathleen Melia and Glenda Struss

a Subaanen village. They had to walk two hours to get there. There was no road that vehicles could travel. The Sisters conversed with the people in their own Subaanen language and organized meetings with the leaders and discussed health and nutrition. A huge part of the work was getting people to hospital and helping them recover after illnesses. A farming program was started to help people grow vegetables and maize. This developed into an agroforestry program which encouraged the planting

of fruit trees on the steep slopes, along with contour farming, to limit the effects of erosion.

For me, the challenge of working with the Subaanen people became more difficult when I used to go with the Columban Sisters and their team to the villages. My ability at the Subaanen language was very limited. I could only make out the gist of what was happening. I had learned the Subaanen Mass and would speak a few words of a sermon mostly in Binisaya. (In fact, many of the people could understand Binisaya better than me.) Then Manuela would translate my words into Subaanen. The Subaanen Hymns, translated by Columban Sr. Ita Hannaway, gave a cultural signature to the mass. Later Bishop Tony Tobias spent time with the Columban Sisters and they incorporated some Subaanen symbols into the baptism ceremony. These symbols



Sean Martin with the Subaanen during the blessing of the new Subaanen Craft center in Midsalip

allowed the people to understand that while they were becoming Christian, they were not rejecting their Subaanen Culture. (Vatican II allowed for sacraments to be celebrated in the vernacular.) Some sacred symbols could not be used in the baptism ceremony because, according to the *balyans* (Subaanen religious practitioners), this would be a desecration of their beliefs. The Columban Sisters' capability in Dialogue helped avoid hurting the Subaanens and the holy people in their culture.

LEARNING FROM THE WISDOM OF...

I learned that Nature – trees and plants, mountains and streams are sacred to the Subaanen people. From them I learned that Nature needs to be cared for. The people best able to do so were often the most despised because they could not be bought by vested business interests and many of them could not read. The sad reality in Church structures is that, generally, the generosity of poor people is out-balanced by the demands made for developing buildings and projects that often can't benefit the people who have to contribute most.

As we experience the reality of the coronavirus, our best hope of a medicine comes from plants and trees whose roots have been used medicinally by ordinary people for generations.

Even though the Mindanao Sulu Pastoral Conference (MSPC) boldly declared that we need to be Self-governing, Self-nourishing and Self-sustaining, the sad reality is that our church tends not to permit people to decide for themselves. “Holy dictatorship is wiser and more efficient in keeping the Holy Spirit under control!” In these times of crises, the church needs to be an instrument for building the Kingdom of God, which it is meant to do.

Many people of faith here in Mindanao have given their lives by standing against oppression. Timuay Ebarle (Timuay means: Subaanen chief/leader) and his son Jerry were murdered in Duilec, Midsalip. He was a wise man and resisted the arrival of mining companies to their ancestral lands. Others like Isidro Gilbolingo, Precioso Tapitan and Colonel Paulino Alecha struggled for years to save the environment from logging and mining. Their lives were threatened for years. These people and so many others were nourished by their Christian faith to oppose oppression and the destruction of the environment.

Looking after nature is our new call. The Subaanen and the Indigenous Peoples are best able to take up the challenge to heal nature and to use plants for medicine. As we all know only too well, even among poor people there are many who oppress those poorer than them so that they can climb the social ladder. In times of environmental destruction and crisis, evil people often oppress and kill; and we are powerless to stop them. Planting fruit trees is a way to encourage ordinary people to defend the trees in their areas. Most people won't allow a fruit tree to be cut down. There is less objection to cutting a rain-forest tree because it does not bear fruit.

Our faith has continued to grow and develop in so far as we have been able to respond to all these new challenges. It is thanks to the wisdom and faith-commitment of the people with whom we have lived and worked over the years that God has allowed our Columban Mission to evolve into what it is today. We can look back with immense gratitude, as we face an uncertain future with renewed joy and hope.



The Youth at Sta. Cruz Sub-Parish in a Tree Growing Project initiated by Sean Martin, Liloan, Bonifacio, Misamis Occidental

Learning to Care for the Earth

A reflection on the 1988 Ecological Pastoral Letter of the Philippine Bishops in the context of the 500th Anniversary of Christianity in the Philippines



by Vincent Busch
Subaanen Crafts, Ozamiz

The year 2021 marks 500 years since Magellan landed in the island archipelago that is now called the Philippines. The Catholic Church commemorates the date of his arrival as the beginning of the story of Christianity in the Philippines. In a recent editorial, Bishop Broderick Pabillo, the Apostolic Administrator of the Archdiocese of Manila, noted that the story of Christianity in the Philippines is one in which Christian Filipinos came to reject the oppression of colonial rule but kept a liberating faith in life, death and resurrection Jesus: “Although the Cross of the faith had come with the Sword of the conquistadores in the time of colonialism, through time the Filipinos have learned to distinguish between the Christian faith and the Spanish colonialism.” (<https://cbcpnews.net/cbcpnews/500-years-of-christianity/>)

Even though Filipinos rejected Spanish colonialism, they discovered that, over time, the oppressive structures of colonial rule had mutated into new social, economic, and political ways (both domestic and global) to oppress the habitats and peoples of the Philippines. To counter these oppressive mutations the Church must continue to call upon the power of the Holy Spirit to imbue our faith communities with the inner strength to nurture and protect the life-giving power of God’s creation. As Bishop Pabillo pointed out in that same editorial: ***“We recognize that a lot has still to be improved in the way we live the faith. It still has to be purified, deepened and fortified.”***

One way that the Church has tried to purify, deepen, and fortify her lived faith can be seen in the Spirit-led efforts of her faith communities to care for and to protect God’s Creation. These pastoral efforts have faced, and will continue to face, strong opposition which comes from the ever-present temptation to plunder our habitats for quick financial profits.

“We must recognize that the commitment to work for justice and to preserve the integrity of creation are two inseparable dimensions of our Christian vocation.”

LEARNING TO CARE...

In their 1988 Pastoral letter entitled: “What is happening to our Beautiful Land” the Philippine bishops praised ecological work of their faith communities and declared that such work is the vocation of all Christians: “We must recognize that the commitment to work for justice and to preserve the integrity of creation are two inseparable dimensions of our Christian vocation.” In declaring that our ecological work is our Christian vocation the bishops were affirming that our Earth-friendly activities are more than optional hobbies and side-line avocations.

How the cry of our “endangered ecosystems” found a voice in the bishops’ pastoral letter is a story worth telling. The initial draft of that pastoral was prepared by Bishop Dinualdo Gutierrez of the Diocese of Marbel. He presented that initial draft to the Philippine bishops who, after adding revisions, promulgated the finished letter during their assembly in January 1988. The Diocese of Marbel is in Mindanao and so the pastoral letter used many examples of the suffering habitats of that island. These examples came from the farmers, fisher folk, and families who lived there, and whose welfare was intimately connected to the health and fertility of their soil, mangroves, reefs, forests, rivers, and watersheds. The farmers spoke of their eroded and poisoned soil as well as the disruption to their irrigation systems because forest-fed rivers were dying due to deforestation. The fisher folk spoke of diminishing fish stocks due to damaged reefs and mangroves, and to polluted seas. Families spoke of the sicknesses that inflict them often because their wounded and polluted habitats can no longer produce healthy food. The letter also presented examples gathered from indigenous peoples who attested to how the deforestation of their habitat had led to the extinction of the many tree, plant, insect, bird, fish, and animal species on their ancestral land.

The letter also noted that ecologically educated Christians within these faith communities saw themselves as members of interdependent communities of creatures, called ecosystems. These people believed that it was in and through their responsible and caring membership in those ecosystems that they were also caring for each other and their families.



These ordinary Christians whose lives were seriously damaged by the destruction of their Mindanao habitats shared their stories and insights within their Basic Christian Communities (BCCs) and within Church-affiliated family and tribal-based ministries. The bishops were in close contact with the lay leaders, church workers, sisters, priests, missionaries, and catechists who facilitated those BCCs and ministries, and it was primarily through these pastoral contacts that the bishops kept hearing the cry of their people and the cry the suffering Earth.

The bishops’ 1988 pastoral letter was Philippine Church’s response to those cries. In that letter the bishops praised the ecologically sustainable live-styles being developed by communities of farmers, fisher folk, families and indigenous

Vincent Busch during a tree growing activity of the Columban Missionaries at the Higaonon ancestral domain, Dansolihon, Cagayan de Oro City

LEARNING TO CARE...



with a Subaanen family at the tree nursery of the Subaanen people

peoples, and they approved the protests and pickets that these communities participated in to protect their habitats.

Within their BCCs and Church ministries Mindanao Christians reflected on their suffering the suffering of their habitats in the light of their faith in a loving God who made the heavens and the earth as a blessed gift. They realized that the ecosystems that continually renew the beauty and fertility of Mindanao, and indeed of the entire Philippines and the world, are channels of God's sustaining love for all forms of life. In the Gospel of Matthew (Chapter 25) Jesus challenges us, his followers, to build, nurture and protect our faith communities by giving drink to the thirsty, feeding the hungry,

clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, and caring for the sick. We can only continue to fulfill Jesus' challenge by nurturing and protecting God's Creation whose ecosystems are God's loving ways of renewing the sources of our food, and our water, and our shelter, and our comforting habitats.

The Church teaches that the books of Sacred Scripture and the Book of God's Sacred Creation proclaim a loving God who intended us, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to protect and nurture our faith community by protecting and nurturing the Earth community. The suffering cry of these two communities is indeed the cry of one interconnected, Spirit-led community. At the end of their pastoral letter the bishops stated, simply and profoundly: "As bishops we have tried to listen and respond to their cry."

A photo taken from the book, "Hope for the Seeds", written by Vincent Busch as a catechetical supplement to the 1988 pastoral letter, "What is happening to our Beautiful Land". The book challenges us humans to take care of our only planet, Earth.





Christian Witness in Negros

by Brian Gore

Director of Programs, San Columbano Mission Center

The first groups of Columbans who came to the Philippines were pastorally oriented men with a lot of zeal for spreading the faith. Their zeal and commitment were shown in the sacrifices that they made during the Second World War, by the decision they made not to desert their parishioners. Five Columbans were murdered by the Japanese and one died when hit by shrapnel during the US Airforce bombing of Manila. They died with their people, having stayed with them during the entire war. Much more so, the people they served were tortured and killed in their thousands at the end of the war.

Up until the 1970s, nearly all Columban pastoral activities were in parishes and school chaplaincies. Columbans were requested to work in parishes due to the lack of priests and took on chaplaincy work to evangelize young men and women and to save them from being recruited by other religious groups.

The big changes came in the wake of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and later on with the proclamation of Martial Law in 1972. These two events had an enormous effect on the Columbans.

By the 1970s Columbans in the Philippines, like their conferees in Chile, Peru and Korea, were struggling to come to terms with the Church living under dictatorship. Columbans in the Philippines had access to all the significant documents coming from Latin America and the theological reflections of many theologians and pastoral bishops. The Philippines could easily identify with its Latin American cousins in terms of history and pastoral experience.

Where the majority of Columbans worked, in Negros and Mindanao, small community groups were emerging in response to the heavy hand of Martial Law. The declaration of Martial Law awakened Columbans to look for pastoral solutions to the challenges of that time. The experience in Negros was especially drastic because of its strong feudal culture, as exemplified by the Hacienda system. It was clear to many that the current hierarchical Church structure was inadequate in dealing



Niall O'Brien with the sugar cane workers at the hacienda

with living under a dictatorship. It could not be business as usual. The Church had to change.

No longer should the poor just accept their lot in life. Things had to change and the poor had to be the ones to bring about that change. They began to realize that it was not God's will for them to live in dire poverty. This was Good News for them. With this understanding of their faith and the understanding that they were to be the agents of change, they had to organize themselves to make this happen. The power of the poor is in their dominant numbers.

At this time, the only institution that was able to help them organize was the Church. All government and private organizations were banned or controlled by the dictatorship. Many priests and some bishops, not only encouraged their parishioners to organize themselves, but actively put themselves and parish resources at their service. The communities flourished and, with this new awareness of their dignity and responsibility, started to confront the dictatorship in non-violent ways. This was the preferred way of change of the emerging Small Christian Communities (BCCs, GMCS and KKs).



Columban Fathers Niall O'Brien (L) and Brian Gore (R), with Fr Vicente Dangan (C), celebrating Holy Mass inside the prison. In 1983, together with six lay church workers, they were arrested on trumped up charges for the murder of a town mayor in Negros Occidental

This emerging church led by the poor was a challenge, not only to the institutional Church, but to the dictatorship. Both were suspicious and threatened by the visual power and commitment of this emerging Church. Traditional leaders in the Church could see their positions in the Church waning and the dictatorship, which was used to the Church being compliant, was fearful that the growth of this “new”

fearless church would spread and make life difficult for them to control, and so, would have to be eliminated. The dictatorship was always looking for ways to destroy the communities.

Pope John Paul II's message on March 20, 1981 in Bacolod, Negros was a defining moment in Church-State relations. In his message to the crowd of 750,000 gathered in the Bacolod Reclamation Area – made up of mainly of *Katilingban* (Small Christian Community) members from all over the Diocese – the Pope declared that: “the Church should never hesitate to be the voice of those who have no voice”. He elaborated on the gap between rich and poor, globally and locally. The people were ecstatic with Pope John Paul II's endorsement. The rich and powerful were angry.

A few hours after the Pope left, Bishop Fortich gathered with his priests in celebrating the great success of the Pope's visit. Suddenly, he was called out to answer a phone call. He was told by the caller, the most powerful politician in Negros, that if that was the Pope's message, then there was going to be war with the Church. This was the first open declaration of war with the Church.

CHRISTIAN WITNESS IN NEGROS

CHRISTIAN WITNESS IN NEGROS



Subsequently, the Church in Negros, as in other parts of the Philippines, was harassed and lay leaders picked up and murdered. The Church had now a new brand of martyrs. There were shocking stories of rape and torture, evacuations and detentions, all because they belonged to the small Christian communities. Priests were not spared. Some were killed, some fled to the mountains and others were falsely accused and imprisoned. Columbans were not spared either, although they were luckier than their Filipino counterparts.

The challenge to build a more communitarian Church with a special preference for the poor continues. Many Catholics feel uncomfortable by the assertiveness of the Small Christian Communities and feel threatened by the bravery by which they speak out about issues that affect the poor. The concept of real community participation in the affairs of the Church seems threatening to many.

The Columbans have responded enthusiastically to both John Paul II's and Pope Francis's call to ecological

conversion. We have been able to make our contribution in stimulating the Church to take the environmental crises seriously. From the prophetic statement of the Catholic Bishops of the Philippines: "What is Happening to our Beautiful Land" to Pope Francis's encyclical: "Laudato Si", many good things are happening, but, unfortunately, many Catholics still feel threatened by the demands that ecological conversion makes – especially those who profit from the destruction of our fragile planet.



Brian Gore sharing with the Amigo Columbano group about the Negros Nine Reforestation Project in Batolinao, Kabankalan, Negros Occidental

Ecumenical Endeavors to Mark 500 Years of Christianity



*by Cireneo Matulac
Vice-Rector of Formation*

As part of celebrating the 500th year anniversary of Christianity's arrival in the Philippines, I was involved in crafting the common statement from the different Christian churches of the Philippines. The Quincentenary was deemed an opportune moment by the different church leaders to strengthen the ecumenical effort towards unity in faith.

BEGINNINGS

The group responsible for drafting the Common Statement was recently formed through the efforts of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines' (CBCP) Episcopal Commission on Ecumenical Affairs to gather the different churches and engage in dialogue. This is, however, not the only ecumenical forum where the CBCP is engaged. They also have a presence within the Ecumenical Bishops Forum, as well as in other different levels of relations between other Christian churches. I suppose all these efforts are ways to take seriously the task of Christian Unity as a fundamental identity of the Church that was articulated in the Vatican II Decree on Ecumenism: *Unitatis Redintegratio* and is reiterated in other church documents on ecumenism that were written after it.

The response from the different churches was short of miraculous. During the initial meeting in October 2019 prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the leaders of different churches demonstrated great enthusiasm, noting that it was time to take seriously the work of ecumenical dialogue between the churches, with the first step being the creation of a working group consisting of representatives from the different churches; who would put on their thinking hats to discuss the activities where the various church communities could get involved. Eventually, the working group was called the Ecumenical Initiative Forum (EIF) of which I am a member.

With the pandemic came a hiatus on regular meetings in person because of the risks brought by physical gatherings. Everyone learned how to minister within their church communities, especially in providing for people's material and spiritual needs. Learning to navigate in this new situation of continually changing levels of community quarantine, people have turned to the internet to meet, study and celebrate liturgies. Eventually, the EIF met again online and agreed to work on common activities in time to celebrate the 500th anniversary of Christianity's arrival in the Philippines.

Three tasks were immediate:

- 1) A Joint Statement from the Roman Catholic Church and the Iglesia Filipina Independiente (IFI)
- 2) A Common Statement from the Christian Churches of the Philippines
- 3) An Ecumenical Liturgy on the occasion of Quincentenary.

DRAFTING A COMMON STATEMENT

I experienced the sincerity of theologians from the different Christian churches in drafting the statement. I suppose it was coming from the fact that they were not only representing their church's theological tradition, but they also had the support of their church leaders and community. This did not make the drafting of the statement any easier. On the other hand, it was a long and sometimes contentious process. I think establishing principles in writing the common statement at the beginning of the process helped tremendously. The principles agreed to by everyone involved in drafting the common statement include that the statement must be non-polemical. It should also be celebratory, honest, and relevant.

One of the most contentious themes in terms of the content of the common statement is the appeal to the history of Christianity in the Philippines, including questions on how the early missionaries contributed to atrocities and violence against the natives of the Philippines during the colonial occupation. The colonial enterprise headed by Miguel Lopez de Legazpi facilitated the arrival of Catholic missionaries, some of whom, alas, were party to some of the violence perpetrated on the people by the colonialists. On the other hand, many of the missionaries included with their effort to evangelize the local inhabitants, the defense of their rights and even becoming outright anti-colonialist. But, because the missionaries were still agents of the king, together with the colonialists, they were themselves still complicit to the colonial system. In fact, even during the US control of the Philippines, one ideology fueling the territorial take-over was the idea of “manifest destiny” – a Protestant theological justification of colonialism that argued that American Christian values would save the Filipinos from Spanish religious superstition. This explains the influx of the Protestant missionaries during the American era. Douglas J. Elwood in his article, “Varieties of Christianity in the Philippines,” published in 1969, records 350 separate churches outside of Catholicism:

“Seventy years ago in the Philippines, it was important to stress division in order to break up the monolithic “unity” which characterized Hispanic Catholicism. Today, however, there is an obvious need to stress Christian unity if small minority of Protestants, now divided into 350 separate entities, is to become a creative minority.”

Missionaries in the colonial era had accomplished great things, but they also colluded with colonial governments in perpetuating the subjugation of peoples. The struggle of the drafters of the common statement was how to hold this duality together without whitewashing historical realities. The section on historical overview was written in the broadest sense possible and forms the context for the next paragraphs that followed it. It is only after acknowledging the missionaries' collusion with the colonial system that the people of a shared Christian faith ask for forgiveness for the past and present transgressions.

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This makes the commitment of advocating for the kingdom of God more real and human. The statement recognizes that the main agent of transforming the world is God, through Jesus, together with the works of the Holy Spirit. The people of God participate in the historical transformation of building the Kingdom of God.

RECEPTION BY THE CHURCH LEADERS AND REPRESENTATIVES

Members of the working group included representatives from the different groups of churches including the NCCP, UCCP, PCEC, IFI and the Roman Catholics. When the members of the working group were still meeting face-to-face, one of the difficulties we encountered was mobilizing our own member churches. Still, it was in working together on these tasks of national significance that people came to know one another. Even when people were only meeting online, there were profound moments of sharing about each other, discovering the tradition and history of other Churches, along with laughter and humor.

I am concerned that, despite the candid and amicable work at crafting the statement, the results would still be perceived as just another exercise at ecumenism similar to previous attempts that did not flourish within our church communities. Catholics can tend to be lukewarm about the need to engage in sincere and lasting ecumenism as mandated by Vatican II.

However, the feeling of the people involved in this endeavor is quite different. We have slowly come to a greater appreciation of how much commonality we have in our faith and theological understanding of church that differences and diversities do not necessarily mean conflict nor a stumbling block to Christian unity, but rather, a deep appreciation of our richness and unique gifts. This realization has created an abundance of hope among the members to work diligently together towards Christian unity.

REALIZATION OF THE DREAM

On August 3, 2021 the historic event happened, the liturgical launching of the two documents: “Celebrating the Gift of Faith; Learning from the Past, Journeying Together” and the “Mutual Recognition of Baptism” between the Iglesia Filipina Independiente (also known as the Philippine Independent Church) and the Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines. Leading the celebration was the Obispo

Maximo of the Philippine Independent Church, Most Rev. Rhee Timbang, together with the representatives of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines including Bishop Emeritus Deogracias Iñiguez of Kalookan and Msgr. Bernardo Pantin, CBCP Secretary General. It was attended by delegates from both churches.



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A significant part of the liturgy was the symbolic exchange of the statues of Mother Mary. The Philippine Independent Church gifted the Catholic Church with a statue of Our Lady of Balintawak, a reminder of the sacred duty to obtain the longed-for independence of the Philippines. In return, the Catholic Church offered the statue of Our Lady of Antipolo, the first national shrine of Mary in the country and also in Asia.

Tears of joy were seen in the eyes of those who attended as they witnessed the first signs of hope unfolding before them, the reconciliation of the two churches after more than one hundred years of division.

The celebration was followed by a meal together. It depicted a beautiful picture of leaders of two churches eating together in one table: hope for Christian unity.



The delegates of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente headed by Obispo Maximo Rhee Timbang (6th from left in red alb) and the Roman Catholic Church headed by Bishop Emeritus Deogracias Iñiguez (7th from right in light brown barong tagalog & black pants) and Msgr. Bernardo Pantin (5th from left beside Right Rev. Rhee Timbang). John Din (far right), a Columban lay missionary, also took an active role in the event.

Below are copies of the two documents:

- 1) Celebrating the Gift of Faith; Learning from the Past, Journeying Together;
- 2) Mutual Recognition of Baptism



**CELEBRATING THE GIFT OF FAITH, LEARNING FROM THE PAST,
AND JOURNEYING TOGETHER**

(A joint statement of the *Iglesia Filipina Independiente* and the Roman Catholic Church)

“Let us be glad and rejoice” (Psalm 118) on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of Christianity in the Philippines. We, representing the *Iglesia Filipina Independiente* (IFI) and the Roman Catholic Church (RCC), express our joint thanksgiving to the Lord for the gift of the Gospel for the Filipino people.

We acknowledge this gift of Faith in God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as expressed in the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed. We share the same Baptism, using the Trinitarian formula. This sacramental initiation incorporates us all in the one Body of Christ. Moreover, both churches manifest a strong devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, invoking her maternal intercession for all her children to come together and for upholding the dignity of women.

Historically, the IFI separated from the RCC in 1902, in the midst of a turbulent period of the Filipinos’ struggle for independence against the colonial rule of Spain and the United States. The formation of the IFI was *not* against the Catholic Church, but rather against the continued domination of Spanish bishops and priests in the dioceses and parishes of the colony. As part of a nationalist revolution, the creation of the IFI also signified a “religious revolution” that appealed to the patriotic sentiments of the populace aspiring for the birth of a nation.

Members of both churches have also participated in the struggle for Social Justice and supported the aspirations of the peasantry for wider distribution of landholdings and the rights of laborers, producing martyrs for justice. Filipino Nationalism, which grew out of the earlier struggle of the Filipino secular clergy for recognition and from the struggle for social justice, is a common legacy of both churches.

With the coming of other Christian denominations during the American colonial period up to the present, Christianity in the Philippines has evolved with a variety of traditions. The *Iglesia Filipina Independiente* has entered into a Partnership Covenant with the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP). She is one of the member-churches of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP), and the World Council of Churches (WCC). She has established concordats of full communion with the Episcopal churches and with several churches in the Anglican Communion, the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht, and with the Church of Sweden. The IFI has accepted women in the ordained ministry of their Church. She also strives to reach out for healing and reconciliation with other separated churches founded in the Aglipayan tradition.

Over the past century, the Roman Catholic Church has also grown with the appointment of numerous Filipino bishops together with the diminishing role of foreign missionaries. She has opened her doors to ecumenical fellowship with other Christian churches. The Decree on Ecumenism (1964) of the Second Vatican Council states that “...all who have been justified by

ECUMENICAL ENDEAVORS...

faith in baptism are incorporated into Christ; ... they are accepted as brothers [and sisters] by the children of the Catholic Church". The document continues by noting that many elements that build up and give life to the Church "can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church: the written Word of God; the life of grace; faith, hope and charity, with the other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit" (No. 3). "The true value of ecumenism...in the area of faith, justice, peace and development" has also been endorsed by the Church's Second Plenary Council of the Philippines in 1991 "for lay faithful, clergy and religious" (Art. 34).

Both the IFI and the RCC thus express their readiness for more ecumenical cooperation amidst diversity. As church leaders, we ask and pray for mutual forgiveness for any injuries inflicted in the past. We shall strive for the healing and purification of memories among our members.

Through "spiritual ecumenism," we commend and encourage joint activities in our prayer services such as the celebration of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, Stations of the Cross during Lent and Holy Week processions, and Scripture reading on Easter Sunday and other important feast days. Members of both churches can also join hands in social action ministries such as defending human rights and the dignity of the poor, migrants, women and children, and indigenous people; care for the environment; and peace building. We can hold ecumenical commemorations for those who have died in the pursuit of social justice.

We encourage our local communities in parishes, schools and seminaries to forge these ecumenical ties of fellowship and common action. We pray for the success of these endeavors, listening to Jesus Christ who says: "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20). At the Last Supper, our Lord also prayed: "That they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me" (John 17:21).

May the Lord of history and our Blessed Mother be our companions in this journey of Faith.


For the Roman Catholic Church:

For the Iglesia Filipina Independiente:


ARCHBISHOP ROMULO G. VALLES, D.D.
President, Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Phil.


THE MOST REVD. RHEE M. TIMBANG
Obispo Maximo


ARCHBISHOP ANGELITO R. LAMPON, OMI, D.D.
Chairman, CBCP-Episcopal Commission on Ecumenical Affairs


THE RIGHT REVD DELFIN D. CALLAO, JR
Commission on Ecumenical Relations & International Affairs


ARCHBISHOP ANTONIO J. LEDESMA, SJ, D.D.
Chairman, CBCP-Episcopal Commission on Mutual Relations


THE RIGHT REVD. VICENTE SALVADOR R. BALLESTEROS
Bishop of Greater Manil



MUTUAL RECOGNITION OF BAPTISM between the IGLESIA FILIPINA INDEPENDIENTE and the ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE PHILIPPINES

Historical Background

In 1947, the Iglesia Filipina Independiente (IFI) approved the Declaration of Faith and Articles of Religion (DFAR), and the Constitution and Canons. They serve as the foundational documents required for the bestowal of Apostolic Succession by the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America (PECUSA) to the IFI bishops on April 7, 1948. The DFAR clarifies in particular the doctrinal position of the IFI on Baptism making clear its administration “with water in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” After the mutual recognition of its orders, the IFI and the PECUSA entered into a Concordat of Full Communion on September 22, 1961 to secure closer cooperation and common witness.

On October 8, 1963, the IFI established Concordat Relations with the Church of England and eventually with the rest of the Churches of the Anglican Communion. Furthermore on January 20, 1980, the Philippine Episcopal Church, then a diocese and representing PECUSA, signed an “Agreed Statement on Baptism” with the Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines. This reciprocal recognition on baptism is hereby acknowledged and adopted as the basis for the Mutual Recognition of Baptism between the IFI and the Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines.

Statement of Mutual Recognition

The fundamental meaning of the Sacrament of Baptism is incorporation into Christ (*Romans 6:3-4*), and thus incorporation into the Church which is his Mystical Body (*Ephesians 1:22*). Baptism is the effective sign of our participation in the Passion, Death and Resurrection of the Lord (*Roman 6:5-6*), whereby the baptized receives adoption by the Father and becomes a child of God, receives adoption by the Spirit, obtains the forgiveness of sins, shares in Christ’s eternal priesthood, participates in his messianic mission in the world (*Matthew 28:19*), and becomes an inheritor of God’s kingdom.

ECUMENICAL ENDEAVORS...

Therefore, our two Churches, recognizing the necessity of Baptism and affirming our common doctrine and practice in respect to this Sacrament as borne witness to by our common tradition and by various dialogues and agreements, do declare:

1. That our two Churches mutually recognize and respect each other's Rite of Baptism as contained in the IFI's Filipino Ritual and in the RCC's Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults and Rite of Baptism for Children;
2. That the Rite of Baptism performed by our Churches is valid and therefore is not to be repeated even conditionally;
3. That, although our Churches have always recognized the Sacrament of Baptism administered according to the New Testament, this present declaration constitutes an act whereby our Churches mutually give guarantee of the validity of the Baptism administered by our respective ministers;
4. That baptisms administered by our respective ministers are to be duly recorded in the proper registry books, and certificates of Baptism delivered to all who are baptized. The presentation of the said Certificate of Baptism shall be deemed sufficient evidence of the fact and validity of the Baptism. We agree, in cases of real doubt, to consult one another in these matters;
5. That we commit ourselves to earnest and continual prayer, consultation, and working together, especially in those areas of Church doctrine and life in which real and serious differences between us still exist, that we may come to the fullness of our unity in Christ of which Baptism is the foundation, the impetus and the pledge.

In testimony thereof, we affix our signatures this Third day of August in the year of the Lord two thousand and twenty-one.

For the Iglesia Filipina Independiente:



The Most Reverend Rhee M. Tim-bang
Obispo Maximo, Iglesia Filipina Independiente



The Right Reverend Delfin D. Callao, Jr.
Chairperson, Commission on Ecumenical Relations and International Affairs



The Right Reverend Vicente Salvador R. Ballesteros
Bishop of Greater Manila Area, Iglesia Filipina Independiente

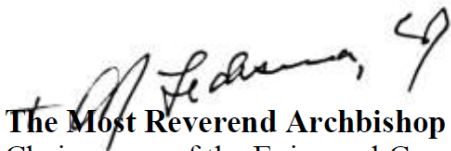
For the Roman Catholic Church:



The Most Reverend Archbishop Romulo G. Valles
President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines

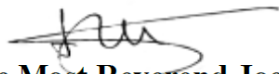


The Most Reverend Archbishop Angelito R. Lampon, OMI
Chairperson of the Episcopal Commission on Ecumenical Affairs
Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines



The Most Reverend Archbishop Antonio J. Ledesma, SJ
Chairperson of the Episcopal Commission on Mutual Relations
Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines

Witnesses for the Episcopal Church in the Philippines:



The Most Reverend Joel A. Pachao
Prime Bishop, Episcopal Church in the Philippines



The Right Reverend Brent W. Alawas
Prime Bishop – Elect, Episcopal Church in the Philippines



**COLUMBAN LAY MISSIONARIES:
GIFTED TO GIVE**

Lilibeth Sabado and Mavic Mercene

Columban Lay Missionaries



**COLUMBAN LAY MISSIONARIES
GROWING IN STATURE AND WISDOM**

by Arlene Villahermosa



COLUMBAN LAY MISSIONARIES

Gifted to Give

by *Lilibeth Sabado*
CLM-Philippines Regional Coordinator
and *Mavic Mercene, Staff, CLM-Philippines*

Perhaps one of the most monumental and revolutionary developments of Christianity is the Second Vatican Council. From Vatican II, the laity's right, duty and role in the sanctification of ordinary lives has been mandated.

The Missionary Society of Saint Columban has been blessed by the many generous lay men and women who have worked with its priests on mission. It continues to welcome laity as partners in mission and pledges itself to help them individually and in groups to fulfill their missionary vocation.

The 1970 General Assembly of the Columbans, the first after Vatican II, stated that the lay missionary movement may well be the beginning of something bigger. The next General Assembly in 1976 clearly recognized that the missionary vocation is shared by lay people as well as by priests and religious. It proposed, that the Columban Society initiate an experiment which would encourage qualified laity to participate in the Columbans' missionary work.

In 1977 the Columbans began to explore avenues for greater cooperation with laity in cross-cultural mission. In the beginning, the focus was on involving specific lay missionary organizations, but soon the invitations were extended to any suitable person. Subsequent assemblies challenged each of the 17 countries where Columbans work to initiate the recruitment of lay missionaries. This cooperation flowered in a commitment to partnership with laity in mission through what was called the Columban Lay Mission Program. The Program evolved gradually through meetings with lay missionaries and was formally approved by the Superior General and Council in June 1994. In October 2006 this development was affirmed with a shift from lay missionaries being part of a Program to calling themselves the 'Columban Lay Missionaries' (CLM).

Being a Columban lay missionary makes it possible for the mission given by Christ to every baptized person to be lived out with grace and humility. This has offered an opportunity to dynamic young Filipino Catholics to reach out and share their Gospel with the world.

The Second Plenary Council in the Philippines (1991) made the important point that: "the aid of the church in the Philippines to the Church in foreign countries in dire need of the personnel should be stepped up through a more concerted effort to strengthen the missionary thrust of religious orders, lay mission groups, dioceses, and in particular the Philippine Mission Society". (No. 19).

Thus far, some eighty Filipinos have become Columban lay missionaries assigned to other countries. This includes a young family with their two-year-old daughter who were assigned in Ireland in 1996. At present, there are 19 Filipino lay missionaries working in Taiwan, Myanmar, Ireland, Britain, the US/Mexico border, Fiji, Pakistan, Hong Kong and the Philippines.



Mission sending mass of two lay missionaries from the Philippines to Pakistan

Over the years, Columban lay missionaries have gradually taken on greater responsibility for leadership among themselves and for the sending and receiving of lay missionaries to and from countries across the globe.

We, Columban Lay Missionaries, yearn to find and celebrate God's loving presence among people everywhere and in all of God's creation. We strive to be God's witnesses in ordinary life and to receive witness to God from

others. The encounters of everyday living challenge us to a deeper discipleship and lead us every day to a renewal and enrichment of our Christian faith. We are grateful.

It is our fervent prayer that the Columban Lay Missionaries may continue to be hope to the hopeless, comfort to the poor and the marginalized and gentle friends to our Mother Earth.



The Columban lay missionaries in the Philippine Region with Columban Fathers, Tim Mulroy (center) and Cireneo Matulac (far right)



COLUMBAN LAY MISSIONARIES

Growing in Stature and Wisdom

(A reflection written by Arlene Villahermosa, Columban lay missionary from the Philippines, assigned in Korea, Myanmar and the Philippines)

When the Missionary Society of St Columban, commonly known as the Columbans or Columban Missionaries, responded to the call of Vatican II, the Society started discussing about the possibility of laity participation in their missionary work. And indeed, as early as the 1970s, the Columbans began to initiate dialogues and discussions in their General Assemblies on how to facilitate greater cooperation with the laity in cross-cultural mission. It was a process met with skepticism, doubts, confusion and a lot of questions, but it also offered a new horizon of hope, of creativity and positivity, an opportunity for a new way of being church where the laity and the ordained can work together as partners in cross-cultural mission.

The process was long and winding, but the focus and intention remained; and the work flourished through the years. In 1990, the first group of six Korean lay missionaries arrived in the Philippines and in the same year, the first group of Filipina lay missionaries was sent to Pakistan.

Since then, the number and participation grew and what started to be a program of the Missionary Society of St. Columban, earlier known as the Columban Lay Mission Program, has now grown to become a partnership in mission. Over the years, the Columban lay missionaries have gradually taken on greater responsibility in the leadership role, not only among the lay missionaries but in Society-wide capacity as well.

The Columban lay missionaries, as individuals and as a group, have truly been blessed by the generosity of the Columban Missionaries and the mission partners around the world who believe in the mission and charism of the Society. Since then, the number and participation grew and what started to be a program of the Missionary Society of St. Columban, earlier known as the Columban Lay Mission Program, has now grown to become a partnership in mission. Over the years, the Columban lay missionaries have gradually taken on greater responsibility in the leadership role, not only among the lay missionaries but in Society-wide capacity as well.

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RICHNESS OF THE EXPERIENCE

The Columban lay missionaries go into mission areas where the Columban priests are assigned. Together as a group, we plan and work on how to do/be on mission in the area with the people and the environment we are in. Bringing with us our own faith tradition, culture,



Left picture: First group of Filipina Lay Missionaries assigned to Pakistan (L-R: Pilar Tilos +, Emma Pabera and Gloria Canama) Right Picture: First group of Korean Lay Missionaries assigned to the Philippines (L-R: Tina, Columba, Gemma, Cherina, Isidora and Gabriela)

practices, skills and experiences, we live and stay in the community where we are assigned and help out in addressing some of the community's needs. We share from what we have and are enriched by the uniqueness of the other, learning and growing from the experience.

Each culture has its own story. The language, music, art and practices of a culture have their own significance in the lives of the people and have formed part of what and who they have become as a nation. This is sacred. And to be experienced, savoured, and shared. The cross-cultural mission, as experienced in living together with diverse cultures in the Society and in the place where we are assigned, has made us see THE OTHER as gifted and beautiful creation of God while embracing our own giftedness and uniqueness as well.

The Columban lay missionaries, in communion with one another, journey with the poor and the exploited earth and participate in building bridges of dialogue between people of diverse cultures and faith in cross-cultural mission (CLM Policy Handbook revised 2014). And we continue the journey of responding to God's call to mission with joy and gratitude in our hearts.

COLUMBAN LAY MISSIONARIES

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FILIPINO COLUMBAN LAY MISSIONARIES 2019

Responding to God's mission by crossing boundaries of culture, gender and race



Join us!

- Committed Catholics;
- 23 - 40 y.o.
- men, women, single, married
- healthy
- college graduate
- with pastoral and work experience;
- has a deep desire to serve others;
- humble and able to work with others;
- no financial obligation to others;
- willing to undergo nine (9) months orientation;
- willing to commit for at least 3 years in another culture.



Brendan Lovett recalls how the wisdom of Bishop Benny Tuftud encouraged the Church in the Philippines to grow in its relationship with the other faith traditions in the archipelago

Interview by Rex Rocamora

Inter-religious Dialogue Coordinator



REX: I interviewed Brendan Lovett about Bishop Bienvenido Tuftud, known to many as Tatay Bido, the first prelate in Marawi, asking him about his memories of the late bishop as a missionary, as a contemplative and about his practice of interreligious dialogue and the living out of his Christian faith. This interview was featured in an online symposium, “Remembering Tatay Bido: A Man of Contemplation”, as part of a series of symposia celebrating the Year of Interreligious Dialogue (2020) in the Philippine Church.

REX: Brendan spoke about how Bishop Benny mediates the great love of God to every person that he meets. Brendan believes that Bishop Benny’s choice to move to the overwhelmingly Muslim, Marawi City, from the more comfortable Diocese of Iligan Diocese indicated a personal freedom and an integrity that was rare at the time. Brendan continued:

BRENDAN: The Spanish form of Christianity did a dreadful disservice to the Philippines, precisely by totally denigrating anything to do with the ‘Moros’ (Muslims) because of their experience in Spain with the Moors (Moros). Bishop Benny Tuftud had the insight that this narrative had shaped the next three centuries in terms of catholic attitudes and had created a dreadful divisive barrier, but worse again, because once you come to see people as the enemy then you have no qualms about attacking them in all kinds of ways. Bishop Benny grasped the culpability of the church in regard to creating a situation in which it was very, very difficult for both parties to live together without killing each other. These levels of enmity that were now being generated by the church's way of viewing these people, was something about which Bishop Benny had become all too aware.

REX: Do you believe Bishop Tuftud was a mystic?

BRENDAN: I honestly think that he had a contemplative gift that enabled him to have the depth of wisdom to know when things were wrong and why they are wrong. So, that long before you had a lot of books written about interreligious dialogue, he already had the wisdom to know that mission isn't a matter of going out and converting everybody. He had the wisdom to know that it is a matter of genuinely sharing religious experience – convergence of religious faith traditions – but in service of what God wants for God's creation and for human beings in particular. God is saying: ‘I have come that they may be one human family’. This never has happened. It has never yet happened all the time that we are on this earth. The wars – killing each other, or wanting to lord it over each other, or enslaving each other – but refusing to accept that we are all flesh and blood, the same people and loving each other as such. Bishop Benny had that so clearly in his head. But you see, if you have that vision and that's your horizon – that everything is 13.7 billion years in the

making and we are all a part of one reality; and if you want to be life-giving for the planet and if you want to be part of God's Creation in the way God intended us to be – then your horizon has to embrace everything.

REX: If Bishop Tutud was here with us now, how do you think he would he want us to bring our Philippine Church forward for the next 500 years?

BRENDAN: What would he be saying at this moment? I think that all the themes that were precious to him and the vision he was living out in his ministry, his Christianity, was inclusive. It wasn't about rivalry. It wasn't about getting people into the church. It was about being present to the lives of everybody else; even though you might not be very deeply aware of the deep meanings of their faith tradition and where they're coming from and so on. But you know that God was always there. And Bishop Benny would say that we would have to transcend the legacy of the historically understandable Spanish take on things and the harm that it did to any possible mutually enriching future for the peoples in the Philippines – because once you set up this enmity and this completely negative image of people, you've destroyed all prospect of a harmonious future.

Bishop Benny's message for us is that we would have to precisely be what God wants us to be as Christians and our faith would need to have meaning for the life of the world. We would have to, not just overcome, but reverse that moment in our history and in our understanding of our own faith and come to realize that we've been challenged to do something much more for the life of the world.

We are being challenged (by our faith) to do much, much more than simply saving our own soul. No. The task that we were born for as spelled out in our baptism is: 'Do you know who you are?' You are someone who has been given one glorious chance to live and die into and for your world. So, if we could get that right then we might be encouraged to be for the world and for history what God wants us to be. And so, I would say that that's the agenda for the next 500 years!

The banner features a row of logos at the top left, including ACRP and others. Below the logos, the text reads "5TH SERIES SYMPOSIUM" in a bold, sans-serif font, followed by "Remembering tatay bido:" in a large, green, cursive font, and "A MAN OF DIALOGUE" in a smaller, bold, sans-serif font. To the right of the text are two circular portraits: the first shows a man in a white clerical shirt, and the second shows Fr. Brendan Lovett, SSC, also in a white clerical shirt. To the right of the portraits, the text reads "THEME: TATAY BIDO A MAN OF CONTEMPLATION" in a bold, sans-serif font, followed by "Resource Speaker Fr. Brendan Lovett, SSC Theology Professor" in a smaller, sans-serif font. At the bottom right, there is a handwritten signature.

Reflections



500 YEARS OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE PHILIPPINES

From the Perspective of a Father

I was born in Oslob, in the southern part of Cebu. I grew up with devout Catholic parents, aunts, uncles and grandparents. My father

by Bernardo Durangparang
Mission Promotion Team



died when I was still three years old. So, my mother took over the role of both father and mother. It's still fresh in my mind how my mother brought us up to be God-fearing children. She taught us how to pray. At a young age my mother would always want us to join her in her night prayers. And so, we would never miss praying the rosary and doing novenas with her almost every night before bed time. Almost every Sunday, my mother would bring us to the Parish Church located at the centre of our town to hear mass. Our home was quite a distance from the town centre and at that time transportation was very limited, no jeepneys or motorcycle taxis, only very infrequent buses. Since we lived in a barrio up in the mountains (around four or five kilometres away from the highway) we needed to walk down to the highway, which took more than 30 minutes. We usually got up at 2:30am and then walked to the highway to catch the first bus in order to attend the mass. Because I woke up early, I would end up sleeping during the entire mass!



Twin sons of Bernie (left & right) after serving Mass at Senior Santiago Apostol Church, Ozamiz City

After completing my primary years, I left my home town and went to Ozamiz, Mindanao to continue my studies. I stayed at the Columban house while doing my studies. During my first year in high school my teachers and classmates would ask me if I was a Muslim. As a kind young, innocent and new kid in town, I would reply with total honesty that I am a Christian and was baptised a Catholic. And I would add that my ancestors were also all Christians and devout Catholics. Apparently, they thought that I was a Muslim because my family name sounded like a Muslim family name. My mother had a great influence on my faith as a Catholic since childhood and I am forever grateful for that. I am also grateful for living with the Columban priests during my studies; they also guided me

on the right way. Now, as a father it is now my responsibility to also teach my children what I have learned from my mother. We also pray together as a family. I teach them to be God-fearing and be participative in church activities as they are now responsible enough to take on roles in the parish. Two of my children, the twin boys, are active altar servers now. Like my mother who always encouraged us to be active in church, I am also doing the same with my kids.

As we celebrate 500 years of Christianity, I pray that every parent will be aware of their responsibility to do what they can so that their children become more responsible and mature Christians. Our church now is different from the church years ago. Our children now are different from the children of the previous generations. Raising our children to become good Christians today is quite challenging. That is why my responsibility as a father plays a vital role in inculcating in my children the Christian values that I have in me. I am confident within myself that I can be a guide and a light to them to help them stay on the right path always. You become confident within yourself that you are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, (Romans 2:19).

500 YEARS OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE PHILIPPINES

As Parents: Being Gifted to Give

by Mavic Mercene, Staff, Columban Lay Missionaries-Philippines

This year we are celebrating 500 years of Christianity in the Philippines. We thank and praise God for the gift of our faith. With the theme “Gifted to Give”, we are all challenged to deepen our faith further and to share this precious gift to others.



“As Christian parents, our ultimate mission is to raise our children to gradually transcend into the person God designed them to be. We care for them, love, train, educate, equip, empower, and nurture them. This requires not only discipline and wisdom, but more so, a lot of gentle kindness.”

Though times have changed with parents now having to compete with other “parents” such as electronic gadgets and social media, these virtues remain even more relevant. We are missionaries: our mission field is at home with our children, in school with their classmates and teachers, in our neighborhood; and when they are grown-ups, like my adult twin sons and daughter, this mission field extends to their co-workers and significant others.

When my daughter Frances Anne graduated from elementary school, we explored the possibility of moving her to a public high school. When she learned that there will be no Christian Living subject there, she thought for a long time and openly expressed her desire to study in an environment where Christ is the center of formation. I was totally taken aback at her faith and inspiration. We let her continue her studies at a Catholic School. She is now in third year college at St. Louis University in Baguio City.

Several years ago, when my twin boys were still in high school, James Patrick was in a situation where he was shamed by his teacher. It was my other son John Michael who reported the incident to me. I waited for James Patrick to give me his version. He was asked to transfer seats twice that day because, apparently, he was disrupting his classmates. It was when he had to transfer seats for the second time that his teacher yelled: “*Kung gaano ka kaitim ay sya ding kasama ng ugali mo*” (Your attitude is as bad as your dark skin). I was shocked. I know that young boys can be naughty; sometimes driving teachers to lose their cool. Under ordinary circumstance, I would have just let this pass and trust that his teacher was only exercising her right to discipline him. This time, however, I needed to hear the teacher out. After meeting with the teacher and representatives from the school authorities, the prefect of students thanked me for exercising restraint during the entire meeting and explained that the week had been unbearably stressful for them with

AS PARENTS...



(L-R): My husband, Exequiel, with my children, John Michael, Frances Anne and James Patrick

several complaints against the same teacher. Many other complaints had come in about her temper, attitude, and distasteful choice of words. The other parents were very angry and some even shouted and pointed their fingers at her. I told them that I was there to complain against the teacher who screamed an insult at my son and if I, too, will raise my voice and shout just to get my point across, then I am no better than the teacher in question.

It takes a lot of courage to be calm and humble; especially when it is easier to get enraged by people who treat us unfairly. But this is our mission field. It may be difficult but it is our duty to bring Christ to our every-day interactions.

Now that my children are grown up, I have taken off and set aside some of my parenting hats to acknowledge their age and appreciate their maturity. I am more of a “life coach” to them now. As their life coach, I bring with me many years of being their mother, conscious and informed of their strengths and vulnerabilities, their struggles and ambitions, and my own parents’ unconditional love for them.

I bring with me experiences of failure, joy, regret, small triumphs and especially my faith that there is Someone greater than us in this whole process. I also bring with me my hopes of a greener and just world as a result of my relationship with the Missionary Society of St. Columban, whose passion is to bring justice, peace and integrity to the whole of God’s creation. I hope that by doing so, I can help my children develop the right plan for their lives ahead, keeping on the right path, that will inspire them to have the courage within themselves to change someone else’s life and find happiness in doing so; and to dare to stand up for something they passionately believe in. I hope they will always believe that things can change for the better, and that when they fail, that they can start again anew. Although my husband and I have expressed it in many different ways during the different stages of their life, the love we have for our children will be forever evolving. We give our love to them freely because we, too, have received love freely.



“Growing up in Christ; Keeping the Flame of Love, Hope and Peace Alive”

by Cesar “Jay-Ar” Ramirez, Vocations Team

Where have all the young people gone?

I have always been involved in church activities for as long as I can remember. I started as an acolyte, became a reader, and now I am a youth leader in our Christian Youth Ministry. There are times of some quiet moments where I can see the ups and downs of our journey as young people. Church elders wonder why there is not only a dwindling in our numbers, but also a diminished quality of service that we render to the ministry. They say that they miss the days when a good number of us enthusiastically come for choir practices, youth apostolate meetings and gatherings, for bible studies and other community outreach services. They also observed that as we transitioned from adolescence to young adulthood, our creativity also lessened. I was always in denial whenever I heard comments like this, and attributed them to old age. But deep inside, I too, see and feel these realities.

In our quest for building one Christ-centered learning community, we need to consider the generational difference among us youth. There are other factors that challenge our Christ-centered youth ministry from flourishing. Navigating the complexities of life coupled with COVID-19 pandemic is quite tough. There are those among us who have to live with abused and differently-abled family members, and have to deal with conflicts between parents. Because of the pandemic, the present reality includes regulated mobility among minors, food shortage at home and online education despite the lack of access to gadgets or the internet. To deal with all of these simultaneously, is enough for someone to go off the rails.

Despite everything, our generation is fortunate to have a Holy Father who is assertive in his calls to

living out the Gospel values in our world today, such as his letters, “Laudato Si’ and “Fratelli Tutti.” Pope Francis understands where we are at when he says: “The Church needs your momentum, your intuitions, your faith.” And when he addresses us with all humility, “And when you arrive where we have not yet reached, have the patience to wait for us”. We are also blessed to have good priests as our shepherds, who allow us to make mistakes and learn from them; who provide us with opportunities but also think of others who may not have access to it; and who invest in our talents and skills so we can shine, regardless of our limitations. We are not machines; we are human beings. Although we are young, we invest, create, share, and build a learning community where the youth can be united as one. We grow and live by Christ’s teachings with the help of our unwavering faith. We recognize that the goals of the different ministries of the Church are irrelevant when they are disconnected from real-life cases.

In this year’s 500 years celebration of Christianity in the country, I pray for a more holistic, open, and enabling Church environment for everyone. Jesus in one of His teachings cited that unless you take the lowly position of a child, you will never enter the kingdom of God. A nurturing learning community of young believers is what our Church elders and the institution aspire to have. For this to happen, we, the young generation, need everyone’s accompaniment and guidance. Please help us discover God and His goodness so we can develop our full potential as human beings.

As a young member of the Church, I pray that the hearts of all young people will be inflamed with living faith to serve God with heart and soul.



A PERSONAL REFLECTION: *Living and Growing in Faith*

by Arlenne Villahermosa (Columban lay missionary)
Regional Communications

“Prepare for Mass; change your clothes now”, was the call my mother would make for all of us to get ready for Mass or for any other Church celebration that we would be attending.

This call lingered on in my memory long after my mother had stopped calling on us to change our clothes for Mass. Over the years, it served as a reminder for me to change, not so much anymore with its intended original message, but in my attitude and ways that are not life-giving, as I prepare to meet God in the daily banquet of life.

Attending Sunday Masses, fiestas and other religious events or celebrations were a big part of our growing-up years from childhood to teenage life, and into our adult years. Whenever my siblings and I heard the call of my mother, we responded either happily, excitedly, half-heartedly or reluctantly depending on our situation at the given moment. The time came when my mother needed not to call us anymore. We took the responsibility of preparing ourselves for Mass. It has become a part of our lives as Catholics. Through the years, we’ve learned to discover for ourselves our different callings in life and how to live out our faith in the paths of our own choosing. The faith that was passed on by our mother to us -which was also passed on to her from generations past - remains alive in us.

My faith journey has led me to becoming a lay missionary of the Missionary Society of St. Columban. I have brought with me my faith experience, along with my search for a deeper relationship with God in the people and in the whole Universe that He has given us. My experience in the Philippine Church, with all its richness as well as its flaws, has been a source of strength on mission. As I shared it with the people in Korea and Myanmar to whom I was sent, they too have enriched my Christian faith and reaffirmed my belief in the ever-present love of God even in the unfamiliar and the unexpected, waiting

to be recognized, to be welcomed and to be accepted. Living a life of faith means being open to see and recognize the many faces of God in our world. Growing in faith is being able to go beyond the self and work together as one community, regardless of gender, faith, nationality, culture and



Arlenne (seated in the corner) attending a youth prayer service one Sunday morning in one of the houses in Banmaw, Kachin State, Myanmar

age, for the good of all and of our planet Earth. 500 years of Christianity in the Philippines is an ongoing journey of a maturing relationship with God as a people, collectively and personally. The Filipino people and the Philippine Church have lived out the Christian faith in many different ways – sometimes in straight paths, other times in crooked lines, and sometimes even with just a shimmer of faith in the heart. The faith that we received from our Spanish colonizers has come a long way, yet we know that a lot of improvements are still needed in living out the Gospel values taught to us by Jesus.

Like Jesus, who grew in stature and wisdom, may our faith mature into a response that hears the call to a life of loving service – a life which hears and responds with compassion, justice and mercy to the cry of the poor, the marginalized and the wounded Earth.

THE COLUMBAN MISSIONARIES

The Columbans are priests, sisters and lay missionaries in cross-cultural mission who consider accompanying the poor and taking care of all of God's creation as essential elements of our missionary commitment to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The idea of founding the Missionary Society of St. Columban was first conceived in China between 1912 and 1916 when Fr. Edward Galvin and three other Irish diocesan priests who had volunteered to work in Hangyang saw the need for a mission from the Irish Church to the people of China. They would have as their patron the 6th Century Irish missionary monk, Saint Columban, who had zealously preached the Gospel in Europe to those who had not heard of Christ. The first group of Columban priests went to China in 1920.

Over the years, the Columbans took on missions in the USA, Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Korea, Myanmar, Japan, Chile, Peru, Fiji, Pakistan and Taiwan. In the past, they also had missions in Argentina, Belize, Brazil and Jamaica.

MISSION IN THE PHILIPPINES

In response to an urgent appeal by Archbishop Michael O'Doherty of Manila, the Columbans began to work in Malate Parish in 1929. By the 1970s, around 260 Columbans were already working in Luzon, Negros and Mindanao. We went to Manila, Rizal, Cavite, Pangasinan, Zambales, Misamis Oriental and Occidental, Lanao del Norte and Lanao del Sur, Negros Occidental, Surigao del Sur and the Zamboanga Peninsula, building churches, schools and organizing communities.

Most of the parishes established by the Columbans are now served by diocesan priests, as the aim of the Columbans is always to build up the local Church. Today, we continue to help the local Church to become more missionary. We work in various ministries throughout the Philippines, including, Parish ministry, Interreligious Dialogue, Indigenous People's Apostolate, Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation, Ministries with the Deaf and those with special needs, and Chaplaincy, among others. We train young men and women from the Philippines to share the God News in foreign lands as Columban priests and lay missionaries.

We believe in the God of relationships whose image we see in all creation. As Columbans, we are sent by Christ as disciples, to be signs and instruments of God's universal communion in a world of conflict and division. ("Our Vision", TCM 2018)

*“Go into all the world,
and proclaim the Good News
to the whole of creation.”*

Mark 16:15

THE JOY OF MISSION



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