



**HOMILY OF ARCHBISHOP ADOLFO TITO C. YLLANA, APOSTOLIC NUNCIO,
ON THE OCCASION OF CELEBRATION IN THE DIOCESE OF BROKEN BAY
OF THE 500TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE FIRST BAPTISM IN THE PHILIPPINES
*Tuesday 16 March 2021 at Our Lady of Dolours Church, Chatswood***

Your Lordship, Most Reverend Anthony Randazzo, Bishop of Broken Bay;
Very Reverend Father David Ranson, Parish Priest of this Church;
Reverend Fathers and Religious;
My dear People of God of the Parish of Our Lady of Dolours:

Our Lord exhorts us in today's Gospel: *"Freely you have received, freely give"* (Mt 10:8), you received without charge, give without charge.

500 years ago in March this year, the People, in what is known since then as the Philippines after the coming of the Spanish circumnavigators, celebrated the event of the first Baptism and the first Mass. It is truly a fitting celebration to recall with joy this very important event of the Catholic Faith, not so much because of what this means to the naturalized Australians of Filipino heritage but, more importantly, because the Good News of Jesus Christ reached the peoples and the seeds of faith were planted in these far-off Islands.

In order to capture and enter the spirit of what is to celebrate this fifth centenary of Christianity, it will be most helpful to recall what Pope John Paul II wrote to us all in his Pastoral Letter at the beginning of the New Millennium: *"[...] A new stage of the Church's journey begins, our hearts ring out with the words of Jesus when one day, after speaking to the crowds from Simon's boat, he invited the Apostle to 'put out into the deep' for a catch: 'Duc in altum' (Lk 5:4) [...] Duc in altum! These words ring out for us today, and they invite us to remember the past with*

gratitude, to live the present with enthusiasm and to look forward to the future with confidence: 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever' (Heb 13:8)" (John Paul II, Novo Millennio Ineunte, 1).

The Filipino Catholics in the Philippines and overseas are filled with gratitude for the grace of faith brought to them by the missionaries of the past, who were guided by the words of Jesus Christ to his disciples, still ringing loud and clear through the centuries, crossed frontiers and unknown lands: *"Go out to the whole world; proclaim the gospel to all creation"* (Mk 16:15). Our celebration this evening manifests the inmost reality of the Church as truly the Body of Christ which embraces and comprehends all peoples and all nations.

This event of faith is fittingly expressed in the Pastoral Letter of the Bishops of the Philippines on the occasion of this fifth centenary. In the letter we read: *"Five centuries ago we received the marvelous gift of the Christian faith; our hearts overflow with joy and gratitude [...] all Christians are 'gifted to give.' This 'giftedness' motivated generous missionaries over the centuries; it must also enflame the hearts of all of us today to engage in mission here at home and in other countries (missio ad gentes). Indeed, this is part of Jesus' mission mandate to his disciples: 'What you have received as a gift, give as a gift' (Mt 10:8)" (Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, Pastoral Letter "Year of Missio ad Gentes – Becoming Jesus' Missionary Disciples", 20 November 2020).*

This is what St. Paul teaches us in the First Reading: *"[...] his generosity is offered to all who appeal to him"* (Rm 10:12). By reason of His grace, the Good News has not only been preached but also has been openly received. Truly, *"how beautiful are the feet of the messenger of good news [...] for in the entire earth their voice stands out, their message reaches the whole world"* (Rm 10:15; 18).

We can imagine the difficulties, deprivations, sickness and countless hurdles the missionaries had to overcome and bear as they brought the faith and shared it with the peoples in the unknown lands! We can almost feel the enthusiasm and inexplicable joy of the disciples when Christ appeared to them at the Upper Room after His resurrection as well as that of the two disciples of Emmaus in recognizing Christ, even belatedly, in their midst. What more would it have been with the missionaries who could not contain their joy and the gift of faith until they could share it.

Not only did the missionaries bring to the Philippines the faith but also contributed by their works to uplift the people and their dignity. They bought

education, development of peoples, enrichment of culture, architecture. They wrote dictionaries in the local languages. They did work to help the peoples achieve the wholeness of every person to whom they proclaimed the good news.

We cannot but remember with genuine gratitude what we have received in the past. *"Freely you have received, freely give"* (Mt 10:8).

These events of faith in the past, prods each one of us to respond with the same enthusiasm and heroic energy in sharing the same faith with others, in witnessing in each one's life what the faith demands, in nurturing that faith by living the good news of Jesus Christ; the good news of life, of love and of mercy of the loving Father.

To mark this very important event of faith, the year 2021 was declared by the Bishops of the Philippines, together with the theme *"Gifted to give, The Year of Missio ad gentes"* (= mission to the world).

The Australians of Filipino heritage who came to this country – priests, religious and lay people – have also shared and are sharing this gift of faith through their often-unheralded and unassuming activities in dioceses, in parishes and in communities. They serve as lectors and servers in the liturgy; they form choirs; they are catechists; they volunteer to do whatever may be needed in the service of the parish Church.

They have expressed their faith externally in a way that is genuinely Catholic and deeply Christo-centric as well as enriched by a singular love and affection for Mary, the Blessed Mother. Oftentimes, these external expressions of faith are either erroneously qualified as ethnic, when it is truly Catholic, or simply devotional, which misses the point of its being profoundly Christ-centered and Marian-inspired. All of these expressions are fruits of the deep understanding of the Gospel like for example, the 9-day Mass, known as *«Misa di gallo»*, which appropriately goes hand-in-hand with the spirit of the Advent season; the *«Sinulog»*, or the *«Feast of Santo Niño»* among many others. There are also those that relate to the special love for Mary the Mother of God as the *«Block rosary»*, whereby one meditates of the life of Christ and its mysteries, to name a few. Let these then be a call to deepen the true fervour and lead to full maturity of faith.

Faith is not meant to be kept but to be shared. Pope John Paul II writes to us in his Apostolic Exhortation *«Ecclesia in Asia»*: "[...] *the Church, and every individual Christian within her, may not keep hidden or monopolize this newness and*

richness which has been received from God's bounty in order to be communicated to all mankind" (John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, 10).

Pope Benedict XVI affirms this exhortation in his «*Message of World Mission Day*» of 2011: "The universal mission involves all, all things and always. The Gospel is not an exclusive possession of whoever has received it but a gift to share, good news to communicate. And this gift-commitment is not only entrusted to a few but on the contrary to all the baptized". We just have to look at the example of Saint Lorenzo Ruiz and Saint Pedro Calungsod both lay catechists who embraced joyfully even martyrdom as they proclaimed the good news to peoples of other lands.

Pope Benedict explained further the meaning of the gift of faith in his «*Message on World Mission Day*» the following year 2012: "Faith in God is first and foremost a gift and a mystery which must be welcomed in the heart and in life, faith is a gift that is given to us to be shared; it is a talent received so that it may bear fruit; it is a light that must never be hidden, but must illuminate the whole house. It is the most important gift which has been made to us in our lives and which we cannot keep to ourselves".

This gift of faith therefore is a call to mission. Mission, not only to those who are ordained in the Sacrament of Priesthood but all those who have received the gift of faith and anointed in Baptism, because we have become "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (1 Pt 2:9), so that they may declare his wonderful deeds of God.

Pope Francis in his «*Message for World Mission Day*» in 2013 said that "each community is 'mature' when it professes faith, celebrates it with joy during the liturgy, lives charity, proclaims the Word of God endlessly. The strength of our faith, at a personal and community level, can be measured by the ability to communicate it to others, to spread and live it in charity, to witness to it before those we meet and those who share the path of life with us".

Saint Francis of Assisi is quoted as having said: "Proclaim the Gospel at all times; if necessary, also by words".

In fact, the Local Church in the Philippines has all these years responded strongly to the call to mission by the number of Catholic Filipino Missionaries present overseas. In the mid-2000, 1,329 women, 206 men from 69 Religious Congregations are on active mission in the different countries of the world, not counting the lay women and men affiliates and volunteers on mission.

Now, we should therefore look to the future with confidence that just as the early missionaries, having transcended national boundaries and bore witness with prophetic spirit and evangelical holiness, were sustained by God's unfailing providence, may we also filled with confidence in fulfilling our mission to share that gift of faith to others.

In the Homily of Pope Francis last Sunday, the 4th Sunday of Lent, at the Mass for the 500th Anniversary of the Evangelization of the Philippines, he said: *"On this very important anniversary for God's holy people in the Philippines, I also want to urge you to persevere in the work of evangelization – not proselytism, which is something else. The Christian proclamation that you have received needs constantly to be brought to others"* (Francis, Mass for the 500th Anniversary of the Evangelization of the Philippines, 14 March 2021).

Let our celebration be not only of the past or present but it behooves that the gift we have received is also shared with those of the future, like your children and the young, without whom the celebration of Faith we all rejoice to remember will just become a dot or distant shadow of the past. Let our celebration be a thanksgiving at the same time for all the missionaries, foreigner, Filipinos, priests, religious and lay persons, and the Christian lay leaders, among them our great, great grandparents, who passed on the faith from one generation to the other through the centuries.

May Mary, model of all disciples and bright Star of Evangelization and Help of Christians, our Patroness in Australia, accompany us, as she did the disciples of her beloved Son having been entrusted to be their mother also, in our journey to joyfully proclaim the Good News to one and all peoples. A gift freely received, a gift freely we all shall give.

AMEN.