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Closing of the Celebrations for the 500 Years of Christianity in the Philippines

Full text of homily by CBCP
President Bishop Pablo Virgilio
David at the Cebu Metropolitan
Cathedral on Divine Mercy
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BINDING AND LOOSING

Dear brothers and sisters in the Lord from the laity, religious and clergy, malipayon na Pasko sa Pagkabanhaw kaninyong tanan. Happy Easter to all of you. What a grace it is to be gathered together in thanksgiving on this second Sunday of Easter, right here in the cradle of Philippine Christianity which is Cebu. We also celebrate this day as Divine Mercy Sunday, and we are also blessed today by the presence of our Beloved Nuncio, Archbishop Charles Brown, and all our brother archbishops and bishops of the Philippines, especially the archbishop of Cebu, Abp. Joe Palma.

Although we are marking this day as the formal closing of the 2nd National Mission Congress and of our celebration of the 500th Year of Christianity, I hope you already know that the Holy Father has allowed us in the Philippines to extend until the end of this year, December 2022 the

granting of plenary indulgences to pilgrims who want to visit our jubilee Churches but may have been prevented by the pandemic from doing so.

I cannot think of a Gospel more appropriate for mission, than our Gospel today. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” I remember that this was the very line that Pope John Paul II kept repeating in his messages to the young people of the Philippines 27 years ago, when he visited us for the World Youth Day in 1995. I think it was these words that began to instill in us a strong sense of mission as a people.

Pope Francis has constantly reminded us that the Church does not exist for herself but for the world—like salt or light, or like yeast for a mass of dough. And so we must constantly ask ourselves: Is the presence of the Church making a

difference at all in society? Is the Spirit able to renew the face of the earth through us? During this congress, we have spoken a lot about “*missio ad gentes*.” But we must also humbly admit that we needed this Congress precisely because we have often misunderstood what this mission is about, many times in the past. At the guise of evangelizing we have sometimes justified the most ungodly things in society, including slavery, racism, colonization, the destruction of cultures, and the abuse of environment. We have tended to equate evangelizing with proselytizing, or propagating a religion, often even using coercive means to force our faith on other people. If we are not careful, the idea of mission can turn us into triumphalistic zealots with a messianic complex. From missionaries we can easily morph into mercenaries without our realizing it.

Pope Francis has consistently reminded us that we do not even have to go to distant places to engage in mission. The ones we are sent to might not even be very far from us—they are around us, in the peripheries. He calls our attention to the fact that modern societies are often built on structures that are unjust and inequitable, structures that tend to benefit only a few and relegate the majority to the margins, as if they did not matter or exist at all. We are never to allow it to happen that those kept at the fringes of society are also kept at the fringes of the Church.

The Catholic social teachings have often repeated that the only civilization we aim to build as Christians is a civilization of love, one that aims to raise our level of humanity, not by the strength of weapons or the levels of GNP, but by the way we express compassion for

the poor, the weak, the elderly, the sick, the disadvantaged, and those with disabilities. There is nothing Christian about promoting civilizations that exclude the majority and treat the poor like disposable trash, says Pope Francis. It is not Christian to promote a utilitarian culture that is motivated only by basic animal instinct of survival of the fittest. In a truly humane society we are mindful of the common good; we protect and empower the weakest. Everyone matters. It is what being in mission means.

For the past two years now since we launched this celebration of 500 YoC, which has been extended by the pandemic, we have reminded ourselves that we have been gifted only to be able to give; we have been blessed only to be a blessing to society and to the world. Like the Eucharistic bread, we have been

taken, blessed and broken, only to be shared—as food for a hungry world.

Where and how do we carry out our mandate for mission? How do we make it happen? Our Gospel today gives us an assurance—we won't make it happen ourselves; it is the sender who makes it happen (through our instrumentality, of course). That is why he said, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." He himself made that possible. How? "He breathed on them," as the Creator breathed on Adam. By the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Lord makes of us a new creation so that through us, he can renew the face of the earth.

Take note, mission is not a mandate to individuals but to the whole Church. We cannot grow into a Church in mission without at the same time growing in communion and participation. Mission is not the

work of individual missionaries or missionary congregations; it is the business of the whole Church. A church that is not on mission is not a Church. This is one of the important insights that we should have gained from this congress.

There is one word that sums up well what this mission is about: MERCY. Very timely for this Divine Mercy Sunday. I know we tend to equate mercy with forgiving. But in the Gospel, John tells us, when Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit on the community of disciples, what he said to them was, “Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them; and whose sins you hold bound are held bound.” I take that to mean the MISSION of mercy is twofold—yes it is about FORGIVING but it is also, at the same time about HOLDING PEOPLE ACCOUNTABLE for their actions. We tend to remember one and forget the other.

Without justice, forgiveness is not yet true mercy.

In another Gospel text, in that encounter at Caesarea Philippi where Jesus called Peter THE ROCK, Jesus had said basically the same thing (Mt 16:19). He used the images familiar to Galilean fishermen: binding and loosing. Binding and loosing—these are what a fisherman must constantly do to maintain his nets, to keep them functional, meaning, effective for fishing. He has to make sure that his nets are in good condition. He has to bind the torn parts and loosen the tangled parts (in Tagalog—talian ang napatid; and kalagin ang mga buhol). In his context as a son of a carpenter, the images of binding and loosing applied to the function of keys for opening and closing the same door. The same keys for opening were also used for locking up. We have to

discern when we should be doing one or the other.

It goes the same way with the ministry of healing. When they perform an operation, it is not enough that a doctor knows how to surgically open up the sick part of the patient's body. He also has to know how to bind him up properly afterwards. Otherwise, he is endangering the patient's life.

I think our problem as Filipinos often has to do with this dynamics. The way we forgive too quickly. We think it is all that it takes to be a minister of Divine Mercy. I wonder if the two rays emanating from the heart of the Lord of Divine Mercy as seen by Sr. Faustina Kowalska in a vision were not meant precisely to empower the disciples for both actions of loosing and binding, of forgiving and holding people accountable for their actions. We have to know when to do what. It

is wrong to do binding when we should be loosing. It is wrong to be forgiving when we should be demanding accountability.

Perhaps this is the reason why the Church's sacrament of reconciliation does not go straight to forgiving. It requires three other components: confession, contrition and penance. Confession, meaning, a humble admission of shortcomings. Contrition, meaning a genuine expression of repentance for having caused harm on others. And penance, which has to do with concrete acts of reparation to convey one's sincere resolve to be reconciled. Only after that do we speak of forgiveness. And the term that we use is absolution. Which literally means "unbinding". The ultimate goal is to set free, to liberate. Is it possible that our forgiveness sometimes fails to liberate precisely because we have

forgotten the other components of the ministry of reconciliation?

Is it possible that if we go straight to forgiving without the elements of confession, contrition and penance, we might not really be able to experience the gift of absolution or the blessing of freedom that we desire? The image that comes to my mind is that of Lazarus, when Jesus brought him back to life. He came out of the tomb, but he still had to be unbound. And Jesus needed the help of the whole community to do that. To bring him back to life, they had to release him from the shrouds that kept him bound.

We are currently in the middle of a global conflict that can escalate into a world war anytime and can dangerously lead to the decimation of the planet earth if it leads to an exchange of nuclear warheads among warring nations. It is obvious

from the way leaders from both sides of the conflict are carrying a whole load of historical baggages from the past. People have not moved on after all. They have not forgotten. When we keep going back to the painful memories of past events, like wounds that fester inside, we never heal. We can never build a future on resentments.

We remain unfree for as long as we remain in a state of duality—which is how I understand the response of Thomas to the news about the resurrection in the latter part of the Gospel. I don't think Thomas was called a twin because he really had a twin brother. I think it was rather because he was like Gollum in the Lord of the Rings—constantly living with a split personality, always in a state of duality between belief and unbelief, between trust and fear, between truth and falsehood.

What was it that finally liberated Thomas from that inner conflictedness? Jesus said—come and touch my wounds. When we refuse to have our wounds touched, there is no way we can get healed. It's the binding and the loosing all over again. It is what we are supposed to be empowered for. There is one liturgical song that expresses well our struggle to do mission in the midst of the inner conflictedness and dualities that are caused by sin:

“All that we have and all that we offer come from our hearts both frightened and free. Take what we bring Lord, and give what we need...all done in his name.”

And so from the table of the Word, we now move to the table of the Eucharist, so that the Word that we have received can take flesh in his body and blood. So that as we partake of him, we enter into

communion with him and are empowered for participation in his life and mission, as members of his body, the Church, and allow his divine mercy to renew the face of the earth.

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