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“Presence itself is the answer” -- Pope Francis in the Philippines

Remembering moments of Pope Francis' trip to the Philippines in January 2015 highlighting his human and spiritual concern for his Filipino children... and grandchildren (who called him “Lolo Kiko”)

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POPE FRANCIS' DEATH early on Easter Monday revived memories of

encounters with him among people of various nationalities and from all walks of life.

ACI Africa noted in a recent social media post that as soon as he heard that Pope Francis had passed away, South Sudan President Salva Kiir Mayardit recalled the extraordinary gesture the Holy Father made when they met in Rome, as the latter knelt and kissed his feet and those of his rival, Vice-President Riek Machar Teny, appealing for an end to that country's civil war. "It goes without saying that South Sudan had a special spot in the heart of His Holiness, Pope Francis," the post quoted President Kiir as saying.

The Holy Father was genuinely so universal and so very sincere that, in all probability, citizens of all 68 countries he visited in the 47 "apostolic journeys" in his 12-year pontificate would say the same thing,

their varied circumstances notwithstanding.

But Filipinos would be glad to know that Pope Francis could not help but fondly remember the rock-star welcome he got everywhere he went during his four-day visit to the Philippines on January 15-19, 2015. The Santisimo Rosario Parish at the University of Santo Tomas (UST) in the Philippines recalled in an April 25 social media post that the Holy Father, speaking in Italian to a general audience at St. Peter's Square two months after returning from the Philippines (the post included a link to the voice clip), said to the delight of those listening: **“When I was in the Philippines, the Filipino people greeted me, saying ‘Lolo Kiko’ — meaning Grandpa Francis — ‘Lolo Kiko’, they said!”**

News on TV and other media have lately featured interviews with

ordinary folk who encountered “Lolo Kiko” in those days, as well as in Rome on other occasions.

Now is as good a time as any to revisit Pope Francis’ 2015 journey to the Philippines.

HIGHLIGHTS

Meeting with Families at the SM Mall of Asia Arena in Pasay City, Metro Manila, Jan. 16, 5:30 p.m.

In this late afternoon gathering, the Holy Father listened to testimonies of various families regarding their joys and struggles in living their faith and life in general in the face of challenges like poverty and migration of those who needed to work overseas in order to make ends meet.

Even as he lamented the proliferation of broken homes and the existence of economic systems

that fail to uplift living standards, the Pope zeroed in on a key message, reminding his audience of the centrality of family in society.

Describing the family not as just the fundamental unit of society, but also as the source of “missionary disciples” who can re-evangelize the world, the Holy Father said: **“The family is also a hospital, the nearest hospital... It is the first school for the young... And it is the best place to grow old.”**

Mass and meeting in Tacloban City with survivors of Super typhoon Yolanda, Jan. 17, 9:30 a.m.

Perhaps one of the more poignant moments of the 2015 papal visit happened in the morning Pope Francis spent with survivors of Super Typhoon Yolanda, internationally known as Haiyan, a Category 5 storm that killed an estimated 6,300 people and injured more than 28,000 others

when it raced through central Philippines in early November 2013.

He told the crowd that had gathered in the rain spawned by an approaching storm that he had longed to visit them as soon as he heard of the devastation caused by the 2013 super typhoon. **“It’s a little late... but I am here,”** he said, to applause from those who had gathered.

As winds picked up around the makeshift stage that morning, the Pope said: **“I have come to tell you that Jesus is Lord.”**

And in what would become a resounding message throughout his visit, the Holy Father continued: **“So many of you have lost everything. I don’t know what to say to you. But the Lord does know what to say to you... All I can do is keep silent. And I walk with you all with my silent heart.”**

Tragedy struck that afternoon, as the winds caused a speaker tower at the Mass site to fall on and kill 27-year-old Catholic Relief Services volunteer, Kristel Mae Padasas, a BS Psychology graduate of Adamson University in Metro Manila.

The Pope sought a private audience with the girl's father the following day in Manila where they prayed together. Kristel was an only child. Her mother, who was then working in Hong Kong, rushed home after the incident.

In recent days, Kristel's father, Jun, told Reuters that he was "heartbroken" by news of the Pope's death. At the same time, Jun said that he was "heartened that, maybe, they (Pope Francis and Kristel) will finally get to meet", asking his daughter to "accompany him to the kingdom of Jesus..."

Encounter with the youth at the UST in Metro Manila, Jan. 18

This get together with thousands of young people centered on the story of a 12-year-old former street child, Glyzelle Palomar, who asked the Pope in tears: “Why does God allow something like this to happen, even if it is not the fault of the children? And why are there so few people helping us?”

A visibly moved Pope replied: **“She is the only one who has put a question for which there is no answer: why do children suffer?”**

“Only when we too can cry about the things that you said are we able to come close to replying to that question... The world needs to weep.”

Thus, he urged the youth there to learn not just with their heads, but also with their hearts.

Rising from his seat, he approached and hugged Glyzelle and 14-year-old Jun Chura, who had also narrated his experience on the street. Both were under the care of the Tulay ng Kabataan Foundation (ANAK-Tnk) which rescues street children. A former ANAK-Tnk resident, Darwin Ramos, who died at 18 years of age in September 2012 from complications from Duchenne muscular dystrophy, was declared a Servant of God in 2019.

The Holy Father had actually made an unscheduled stop at the ANAK-Tnk house in Metro Manila on Jan. 16 — the first day of his visit — which had also been marked by a reception with then President Benigno S.C. “Noynoy” Aquino III in Malacañan Palace. What was then supposed to be just a 2-minute stop at ANAK-Tnk stretched to 20 minutes, as the Pope listened to stories and songs from about 320 children there, Fr.

Matthieu Dauchez, the foundation's executive director, recalled in a TV interview a few days ago.

***Papal Mass at Quirino
Grandstand, Rizal Park, Metro
Manila, Jan. 18, 3:30p.m.***

Nearly 7 million Filipinos endured pouring rain to attend this Mass, making it the biggest papal gathering in history so far, surpassing even Saint Pope John Paul II's World Youth Day Mass in 1995 that drew an estimated 5 million people.

In his homily, Pope Francis spoke of Filipinos' faith, joy, and courage through trials.

“You are a people of great faith. I have seen it, I have heard it, I have felt it! And I am deeply moved by your faith and by the love you show for Jesus and his Church.”

He then exhorted the Filipino faithful to protect the family, children, and creation, and to “**be very careful with the devil,**” who tries to destroy unity and love.

ENDURING LESSON

Besides the call to protect the family in a country with a promising relatively young population but where many are forced to leave their families for jobs abroad, there is one other message that marked Pope Francis’s 2015 visit to the Philippines.

And it is one that will come in handy in those moments with family members or friends who seek consolation amid daunting difficulties.

Looking back to those days in 2015, ANAK-Tnk’s Fr. Dauchez said it best: when in the recent interview he recalled that while Pope Francis admitted that he did not have the

answer to Glyzelle's question — nor to the tragedy that struck Yolanda's victims — his actions showed that “perhaps, presence itself is the answer” whenever words fail or fall short.

Edited by WGR and staff writers

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