

A NATION OF MERCY AND COMPASSION

Miserando atque Eligendo
(*Lowly but Chosen*)

Pastoral Letter to Prepare the People of God for the Apostolic Visit of Pope Francis

My dear people of God:

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Philippines officially announces the visit of the Holy Father, Pope Francis to the Philippines, God willing at the beginning of next year, 2015. His visit carries a message of pastoral love, mercy and compassion from a Pope with the scent of a Good Shepherd (cf. John 10). Even though, this will be the fourth papal visit to our nation, for Pope Francis he will be the third Pope to visit our country. As the Successor to the Chair of Peter, the Holy Father is coming to strengthen his brothers and sisters (cf. Luke 22:32).

The underlying spirit of this Papal visit is the theme of “mercy and compassion” the cherished ideals of Jesus. In this regard, Matthew 9:36 tells us that Jesus “seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd.” In this context, Pope Francis comes to revive our “drooping spirit” and to lead us to greener pastures (cf. Psalm 23). Hence, he is bringing to us “the joy of the gospel” enshrined in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*.

Usually, our first reaction to the news of a papal visit is understandably one of euphoria and thanksgiving. The excitement of seeing Pope Francis in the Philippines is rising as the year 2015 gets nearer. However, we must prepare the nation to receive the Holy Father by setting our minds and hearts in communion with our dear Pope Francis, the messenger of peace, love, and the apostle of the poor. Our compassionate shepherd comes to show his deep concern for our people who have gone through devastating calamities, especially in the Visayas. He comes to confirm us in our faith as we face the challenges of witnessing to the Joy of the Gospel in the midst of our trials.

This is an eloquent way of showing mercy and compassion. Accordingly, in his Apostolic Exhortation, he has already voiced this concern in these words: “some people continue to defend trickle-down theories which assume that economic growth, encouraged by a free market, will inevitably succeed in bringing about greater justice and inclusiveness in the world. This opinion, which has never been confirmed by the facts, expresses a crude and naïve trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power and in the sacralized workings of the prevailing economic system. Meanwhile, the excluded are still waiting” (*Evangelii Gaudium* 54). And the Pope comes to bring hope to our excluded Philippines. He brings a message to the poor among us.

A PEOPLE EAGER TO WELCOME

good life of the Gospel” (*Evangelii Gaudium* 114). Consistent with this, the Holy Father has clearly laid out his wish that the main objective of his visit is to bring Christ’s compassion for our suffering people still struggling to rise from the devastations wrought by the earthquake and typhoon that hit the Visayas.

This demand of Pope Francis is also consistent with Daniel 4:24 (NAB) which says: *“Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue.”* Accordingly, it is not the logistics, security and infrastructure that best prepare us for the papal visit. Let us be like Pope Francis in his humility and his compassion. Let us make his apostolic journey of mercy to be ours even before he arrives.

A POPE RICH IN MERCY

In connection with the recent canonization of Saint John Paul II, and the remarkable emphasis Pope Francis has been giving to this particular element in Christian life, may we choose MERCY, incarnated, embodied, symbolized in the poor amongst us, to be placed at the center of this spiritual preparation for the papal visit.

It was Saint John Paul II who wrote deeply and movingly of God Our Father as *“Dives in Misericordia”*. In that profound encyclical, “mercy” was his name for God. Pope Francis, from the first days of his pontificate, has been preaching insistently and passionately on God’s constant and untiring mercy, and on the primacy of the Church’s mission of mercy and compassion in the world of our time.

It is noteworthy that perhaps the first major doctrinal-spiritual book of Pope Francis, which has been published in English bears the title, *“The Church of Mercy”*. The book “presents the heart of his teaching on the most fundamental themes of his vision of a new way of being Church.”

In it, the Holy Father asks: *“Are we a Church that really calls and welcomes sinners with open arms, that gives courage and hope, or are we a Church closed in on herself? ... Are we a Church which is a house for everyone, where all can be renewed, transformed, sanctified by God’s love, the strongest and the weakest, sinners, the indifferent, those who feel discouraged or lost? ... Are we a Church where the face of God dwells, where one cares for the other, where one prays for the other?”*

EMBRACING THE MERCY OF GOD

From Pope Francis’ teaching, two aspects of mercy may be singled out.

First, the mercy and the patience of God toward sinners are made manifest in Jesus. Jesus is *“the visible face of the mercy of God.”* As the Father in the parable of the Prodigal Son, *“God is there always, always waiting for us; he never grows tired. Jesus shows us the merciful patience of God.”* And *“this patience of God calls forth in us the courage to return to him, however many the sins and mistakes there may be in our lives.”* Like Thomas in the gospel, *“we too can enter into the wounds of Jesus; we can actually touch him. This happens every time we receive the sacraments with faith.”* *“It is there, in the wounds of Jesus, that we are truly secure; there we*

poor, the sick and the needy. The path to our encounter with Jesus is his wounds. There is no other.” (Pope Francis, 3 July 2013)

A question then arises. In our Christian lives, where may we in fact draw the profound spirituality of mercy that can truly help us prepare spiritually for the papal visit?

“They will look upon him whom they have pierced” (John 19: 37, NAB). The Fourth Gospel, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI wrote, sums up the whole Christian spirituality. In this great image we see the whole story of our salvation in Jesus. We see God’s faithful love and mercy shining forth from the Cross. And we see the human response to that merciful love also in the pierced Heart of Christ.

A PEOPLE RICH IN MERCY

The most distinctive way to prepare spiritually for the coming of Pope Francis is for the Philippines to become a people rich in mercy. Let us make mercy our national identity. Trust in God’s mercy is part and parcel of our traditional Filipino Christian culture. Let us make the practice of mercy our gift to the Pope when he comes to visit us.

Concretely, in this period of preparation for the visit of Pope Francis, we are bidden to turn to the fountain of all mercy, Jesus, and encounter the Divine Mercy in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. And having received such mercy we in turn practice acts of mercy.

In the Catechism of the Catholic Church we read: *“The works of mercy are charitable actions by which we come to the aid of our neighbour in his spiritual and bodily necessities. Instructing, advising, consoling, comforting, are spiritual works of mercy, as are forgiving and bearing wrongs patiently. The corporal works of mercy consist especially in feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and burying the dead. Among all of these, giving alms to the poor is one of the chief witnesses to fraternal charity: it is also a work of justice pleasing to God.”* (CCC 2447)

At the societal level, let us also not forget to address justice and mercy issues in the root causes of poverty and inequality in our country – such as the protection of the environment, the completion of agrarian reform, and the continuing challenges of good governance, peace-building, and inclusive growth for all.

A PREPARATION RICH IN MERCY

We encourage you our dear people to resolve to make an act of mercy every day.

You can reach out to a lonely stranger. You can tell the story of Jesus to a child eager to understand and feel the love of God. You can advise a confused co-worker. You can forgive someone who has wronged you.

You can give food to a hungry beggar. You can contribute to building homes for the typhoon victims. You can visit those in jail or prison. You can visit the charity ward

As we prepare for the coming of the Pope we are asked to have more access to the Sacrament of Reconciliation and encourage our priests to increase their availability and visibility at the confessional, and turn earnestly to fervent participation in the Eucharistic sacrifice and even spend more time in Eucharistic adoration and to zealously be involved in making our Basic Ecclesial Communities and other faith-communities as venues for mercy and reconciliation. Let us prepare to see the Pope by reviving personal and family prayer. Pope Francis has challenged us to restore family prayer and devotion in our homes.

All of this opens to, nourishes, and sustains in our lives the gift of Mercy from the Heart of Jesus! May our Shrines of Divine Mercy be the source of inspiration and strength for our families.

When the Pope comes, he will bring with him the message of the mercy and compassion of God. When he meets us, may he see in us a people touched by the mercy of God, living out the compassion of God, a people truly rich in mercy and compassion and grateful to those who have shown mercy to us especially after various calamities hit our country.

May Mary, Our Mother of Mercy prepare us to meet Jesus in Pope Francis!

For the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, July 7, 2014

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