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**THE WORD OF GOD IN THE LIFE AND MINISTRY
OF AN ASIAN CHURCH**

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I came from the Philippines. I cannot presume to speak for the whole of Asia which stretches from Turkey up to Indonesia, more than 53 countries in all, so varied in its cultures and religious situations. The Philippines is very much in Asia – South East Asia to be exact, surrounded by Japan and Taiwan in the north, China and Vietnam in the west, Indonesia in the south and the Pacific Ocean in the east. It is unique though from the rest of Asia because until recently it is the only Christian, and Catholic, nation in all of Asia. Until recently, because in May 20, 2002, through the UN act of self-determination, Timor Leste became an independent country, and it too is Catholic. There is a great difference though between the Philippines and Timor Leste. The Philippines has 92M population while Timor Leste has only 11M. Roughly the Philippines is 93 % Christian and 83% Catholic. In this situation then the Word of God has a unique significance for our people and has great potentials in the work of evangelization.

The Filipinos are a very religious people. We find religion as a great support in life and as a special occasion to express our communitarian spirit. This is felt even among the more than 10 million Filipinos who are living outside of the country. Everywhere where Filipinos are found we find them together in Churches. Churches are where they congregate and meet each other. In our country people meet together in Church on religious occasions, like the patronal feasts of each town or village, on Christmas and the Holy Week, on All Saints' Day, during baptisms, weddings and funerals. There is great effort in the hierarchical church to take these occasions of gathering to preach the Word of God. People want to have the Holy Mass. So we have masses in government and business offices especially on First Wednesdays and First Fridays. Office workers forgo their lunch break to attend Mass. In the headquarters of the Central Bank in Manila, there are three masses every day – one at 7 in the morning, one at noon and one at 5:30 in the afternoon! Mind you, this is a government office, not a parish! We have Sunday masses in shopping malls. In one big mall, the Megamall, a big church in the 5th floor was constructed which has a thousand sitting capacity. It has 2 masses every day and 7 on Sundays! This is a shopping mall! Where else but in the Philippines you find this! All these are venues where the Word of God is preached.

In big cities such as Manila and Cebu where many people are educated, the faithful are looking for meaningful and enlightening homilies. In the 1960's the Curcillo

movement was very popular. Through intensive preaching in three days of the curcillo classes many were brought back to a more serious living of the faith. Then in the 70's Pentecostalism came. It came as a protestant movement and many became "born-again" Christians, living behind their Catholic faith. Fundamental Pentecostalism heavily uses the Bible. The Catholics took this as a challenge. Instead of rejecting it, many organized Catholic Charismatic groups. They used the same style of prayer meetings, lay leadership and strong fellowship but not leaving the Catholic faith. Instead they had prayers to the Blessed Virgin included. They invited priests for the sacraments. Now most of the major charismatic groups in the country are Catholic. Fundamental Evangelicals are still active and they do recruit many Catholics but not in such great numbers as before. The popular charismatic groups now are Catholic, like the El Shaddai which has 7 million members and the Couples for Christ (Foundation for Family and Life) which is 45 thousand members in the Philippines and 55 thousand abroad (63 other countries); Couples for Christ (Global) which has 800 thousand in the Philippines and 1 million members abroad.

The onslaught of Protestant Pentecostalism made the Catholics take the Bible more seriously. Many Catholic lay faithful study the Bible. Catholic Bible study groups became more common, though not as common as we want them to be.

While Catholic Charismatic groups became popular in the cities in the countryside the small Christian communities - popularly known as the BECs or Basic Ecclesial Communities - are slowly spreading, first in the mainly island of Mindanao in the south since the 1960's, then in the rest of the country, especially since the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II) in 1991 made the BECs as our new way of being Church. These BECs are small communities of 20 to 100 neighbors who meet together regularly, mostly weekly, to pray together, to read the Scriptures and to discuss their life situation from the point of view of the Word of God. These communities are lay-led. They not only pray but help each other as Christian neighbors. Priests come to them now and then to minister to their sacramental needs. The leaders are gathered by the priests in the parishes to give them formation and make sure that the parish is a community of communities.

A characteristic of our Catholic Christian faith in the Philippines is the great role of the lay people in the exercise and passing on of the faith. This is greatly due to the fact that since the very beginning of our Christianity we have very few ordained priests in proportion to the baptized. Presently the general ration of priests to the baptized is around 1 priest per 9,500 baptized Catholics, although in the archdiocese of Manila we have parishes with one priest which have 70,000 and even 120,000 baptized Catholics! Evangelization can go on in these situations because the priests are helped by active lay people. The faith is preached by catechists, lay charismatic leaders, and lay BEC leaders.

This is not enough though. We need to do something more! Yes, we continue to recruit vocations to the priesthood and the religious life. I would say that till now we are still able to get vocations. We continue to train lay leaders and catechists. We continue to form BEC groups and organize or follow-up charismatic prayer groups. But we need to do something more to reach the many unchurched Catholics. The venue that is still to be tapped is the mass media. The Catholic Church has 49 radio

stations among 1020 radio stations all over the country. We have only one TV channel while other religious groups have 2 or more 24-programs on the TV. Yes, we can do more to spread the Word of God in the media. The great obstacle is that pointed out is financial. It would require big money. But I think the greater problem is our commitment to put our money where our mouth is. If we believe enough that evangelization is our primary mission and the mass media is an enormous tool to evangelize, then we will not stop to put our resources together to maximize our use of the mass media.

A word on the serious study of the Bible. The Synod of Bishops on the Word of God has words of appreciation and gratitude to those who have given their expertise and their lives for research and deeper understanding of the Bible. Our first Bible teachers and experts in the country were foreign missionaries. Now most are Filipinos who have been trained in universities here in Europe and in America. Many are alumni of this institution. It is now high time to start something in Asia itself. We are able to study here in Europe because of sponsorships. It is so expensive to study here on our own. Foreign sponsorship is hard to get nowadays. But more than just the financial consideration, we need our Asian way of exegesis and understanding the Word of God. I must admit that many of the methods we learn here we cannot pass on to our students and to our people. Historical-literary methods are not appreciated and are beyond the intellectual reach of many. Except for those who have received Western education – and that is a small minority – many of our people do not have an historical frame of mind. They could not imagine what it is 200 years ago and what significance 200 years ago has in their lives now. Our memory of the past is very short and narrow. Perhaps for people who are poor, the present, the now, is only reality that is important. Life is really a daily struggle to survive! Many of our people have very little familiarity with literature and how it is to be studied. Although most of the people are literate – 93% of our people – most are not in any habit of reading, since reading materials are expensive and hard to get by. Very little literary output is found in the local languages. People however are very much at home with stories – stories from word of mouth, from radio dramas and from TV tele-novellas. It is natural for them to enter into the stories and become part of them. Perhaps we can maximize this way of understanding the Bible since Salvation History is a story. Oh, they love the Infancy, the Passion and the Resurrection narratives! Moral sayings are also popular. These can easily be connected with the proverbs of our Old Testament wisdom literature. It is natural for people to pray at different moments of their lives. They can easily appropriate the psalms and the prayers in the Scripture. The above are some possibilities that can be examined so that the Bible can be presented, studied and be an integral part of the Filipinos' lives.

Last January and February a long-dreamed of initiative in the Asian region of the Federation of Biblical Apostolate was begun. The dream was to have an Asian Biblical Institute. It had its humble beginning with a study course on the Bible by Asian Bible experts given to Asian Pastoral workers – priests, religious and lay people. It was done at the EAPI (East Asian Pastoral Institute) in Manila. It is hoped that this will develop into an Asian Biblical Institute in the future.

In order to consolidate the works of the people in the country who have trained in the Bible in 1999, at the inspiration and push of Fr. James Swetnam in his visit to our country, the Catholic Biblical Association of the Philippines (CBAP) was organized. It has been faithfully meeting every year for 10 years now. It is made up of people who have at least a licentiate in Biblical studies. There are 64 members in the association and an average of 30 members attend the yearly conference, with a scholar from overseas sponsored by the Catholic Biblical Association of America (CBAA) giving us a lecture. Here the works of our local Bible experts are also discussed and published.

There are many activities too in the field of Bible translation, production and distribution. The Philippines has 170 languages, 12 of which are spoken by more than 1M persons. So far the whole Bible is translated into 8 major languages. Six(6) other languages have only the New Testament. We must give credit to the Philippine Bible Society (PBS), the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), the Episcopal Biblical Apostolate (ECBA) of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) and many other religious congregations for this very patient but important work that was done in the past 100 years.

We can be proud that in our country the close link between the Philippine Bible Society and the Catholic bishops can serve as a beacon in ecumenical cooperation. Last year, the PBS and ECBA together launched an ambitious program called MAY THEY BE ONE (MTBO). It is a program aiming to produce 5 million Bibles in 5 years and offer these to the poor at a subsidized price that they can afford. The lowest priced Bible is 150 pesos. We will sell each at 50 pesos to the poor and we will look for sponsors who can give 100 pesos so that the poor can buy it at 50 pesos. We hope to reach 5 million poor families, most of them Catholics. This project has two thrusts. One is to identify 5 million poor families and given them basic Bible training so that once they buy a Bible, they will read them. The second is to find donors, both in the country and abroad, who will subsidize the Bible for the poor. This project had been presented at the Synod of Bishops last Oct of 2008. It is supported by the United Bible Societies and by the Catholic Biblical Foundation (CBF). Imagine a nation with 5 million more readers of the Scriptures! What transformation it can bring about since the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation (Rom 1:16).

This is an exciting time in the Philippines for the Bible apostolate in particular and for the spread of the Word of God in general. It is exciting because of great challenges on the one hand and the fertile ground of readiness on the other. The fertile ground:

- There is great thirst for the Word of God in general. There is great religiosity and people want to draw near to God.
- There is a basic acceptance of the Bible as Word of God. The authority of the Bible is generally recognized.
- There are initiatives to bring together people who are engaged in the study, the translation and the distribution of the Bible among Bible experts and among the Catholics and other Protestant groups.

- The presence of many groups and movements among the lay faithful that promote the Scriptures and preach the Word of God.
- The great desire of people for transformation in the political and economic spheres and the recognition that this can only be done with God's help. The important role of the Church for this societal transformation is accepted.
- The recent Synod of Bishops on the Word of God which will be a great impetus in the continued work of evangelization within and around the country.

The challenges:

- The great poverty of the people that keep many from owning a Bible.
- The great ignorance of the faith among many of the baptized.
- How to inculturize the Bible message that people can see it operative in their lives. In a word, how to find an Asian way of reading the Scriptures.
- The aggressive proselytism of fundamentalist Evangelical groups.
- The corruption in the government and the natural calamities to which the nation is prone which aggravate the poverty and sufferings of the people.

This is indeed the Kairos of the Word of God in the Philippines. The challenges present to us great opportunities. Indeed we can say with St. Paul for our church in the Philippines: See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! (2 Cor 6,2).