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Audience with the Community of the Pontifical Filipino College

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the Community of the Pontifical Filipino College “de Nuestra Señora de la Paz y Buen Viaje”, on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the evangelisation of the Philippines and the 70th of the founding of the college.

The following is the Pope’s address to those present:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear priests, religious and lay faithful of the *Pontificio Collegio Filipino de Nuestra Señora de la Paz y Buen Viaje*,

I am pleased that we can meet and commemorate the five-hundredth anniversary of the evangelization of the Philippines and of the celebration of the first Holy Mass, which took place on Easter Sunday, 31 March 1561. There is another, more recent, anniversary that also deserves to be remembered: that of the foundation of your College on 29 June 1961. Saint John XXIII personally inaugurated the College on 7 October of that year. Together let us thank the Lord for these sixty years of priestly formation, which have provided many seminarians and priests with the opportunity to grow as priests according to the heart of Christ for the service of the People of God in the Philippines.

As we reflect on these anniversaries, I would like to share with you *some thoughts about time*. Our life takes shape in time and time is itself a God-given gift, to be used responsibly to express our gratitude to him, to do good works and to look to the future with hope. I thank the Rector for his kind words, and I am glad Cardinal [Tagle] is with you. This is a beautiful thing. Now let us return to our thoughts about time.

First, let us reflect on the *past*, the history that is part of every individual and every life. Going back in time, even centuries, as we are doing for the birth of the Church in the Philippines, is like returning in memory, retracing the footsteps of those who came before us, to the very origins of your faith, with a sense of gratitude and wonder for

all that you have received. Every anniversary is an opportunity to flick through our “family album”, to remember where we come from and the experiences of faith and the testimonies to the Gospel that have made us who we are today. Memory. A “Deuteronomic” memory; a memory that is always at the basis of daily life. The memory of the journey made so far ... “Remember, be mindful”, said Moses in Deuteronomy. “Remember past times, the graces of God, do not forget”. Remember your roots. Paul said to Timothy: “Remember your mother, your grandmother”. The roots, the memory. So too, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews tell us: “Remember *pristinios dies*, those early days, and remember those who proclaimed the Gospel to you”. A Christianity without memory is an encyclopedia, not a way of life.

Memory is important for an entire people, but also for every single person. Each of us should think back on the many beautiful and not so beautiful, the good and not so good memories we have, but always seeing in them God’s providence. Reflecting on the past reminds us of those who first helped us fall in love with Jesus – a parish priest, a nun, our grandparents, or parents – to whom we are indebted for this greatest of gifts. For priests, we think especially of the time we discovered our vocation, the moment when we said our first convinced “yes” to God’s call, and the day of our ordination.

Whenever you feel weary and disheartened, downcast as the result of some setback or failure – and this is the case with everyone – *look back on your history*, not to find refuge in an idealized past, but to regain the momentum and passion of your “first love”, the one spoken of by Jeremiah (cf. *Jer* 2:2). Go back to your first love. It is good to retrace the steps God has taken in our life, the times when his path crossed ours to correct, encourage, renew, redirect and pardon us. In that way, we come to see clearly that the Lord has never abandoned us, that he has always been at our side, sometimes quietly, sometimes clearly, even at times that seemed to us darkest and most arid.

If the past can help us be more aware of the firmness of our faith and vocation, the *future* broadens our horizons and teaches us hope. The Christian life is by its nature projected towards the future, both the immediate future and that more distant future, at the end of time, when we will encounter the Risen Lord who has gone to prepare a place for us in the Father’s House (cf. *Jn* 14:2).

If remembering the past should not turn into self-absorbed introspection, we should also avoid *the temptation to take refuge in the future* and not serenely confront the present. If we are in the seminary, everything is dreary, because all we can think about is what life will be like after ordination. If we have been given a pastoral responsibility, as soon as the first difficulties arise, we already start thinking about other, supposedly better assignments. The result is like a sinful and immature flight to the future in order to escape from the present. The real future is anchored in the present and in the past. Many people go on like this for years, or for a lifetime, without ever being converted. It is like having a constant spirit of complaint about everything. Instead, we need to look both forward and backward. You have God’s promises and his election. Make that a covenant that you constant bear with you. Do not wander around in the labyrinth of your complaints and dissatisfactions. That is the start of a very nasty disease, a bitterness of soul.

Dear priests – but this also applies to you who are consecrated, to the lay faithful, and to all of you – do not be *eternal procrastinators*, always putting off to hopefully better times and places – a utopia in the bad sense – that postpones the chance to do some good in the here and now. Do not live in constant “apnea”, simply tolerating the present and waiting for it to pass. “Yes, Lord, maybe tomorrow...”. The tomorrow that never comes.

Looking to the *future* in a positive sense means having a *prophetic gaze*, the gaze of a disciple who, in fidelity to the Master and the task set before him, can look ahead, seeing possibilities and working in accordance with his own vocation to make them happen, acting as a docile instrument in God’s hands.

Now that we have “traveled” to the past and to the future, let us return to the *present*, the only time we now possess and are called to use for a journey of conversion and growth in holiness. God is calling us in the present, not yesterday, not tomorrow, but this very day, with its difficulties, sufferings and disappointments – and also our sins. These are not to be refused or avoided, but embraced and loved as opportunities that the Lord is offering us to be ever more closely united to him, even on the cross.

Now, dear friends, is the *time to be decisive*. As priests, you are in Rome to study and to receive ongoing formation in the community of this College. You are not being asked to yearn for the parishes you once served or to dream about the “prestigious” positions your Bishop will give you on your return... This is day dreaming. Instead, you are being asked to love this concrete community, to serve the brothers and sisters that God has given you – and not speak ill of them – and to take advantage of the pastoral experiences set before you. That is the reason you were sent here, to be serious and diligent in your studies. As Saint John Paul II said to your predecessors, “through your commitment to your studies, you will be prepared to carry out the ministry of the word and to preach the mystery of salvation clearly and unambiguously, distinguishing it from merely human opinions” (2 June 2001).

So, know the past, prepare for the future and fully experience the present as an opportunity for formation and growth in holiness. Embrace the opportunities that the Lord gives you to follow him and to conform your life more closely to his, even though you are far from your beloved country, the Philippines.

Let me conclude by repeating what Saint John XXIII said sixty years ago to the first community of the Philippine College, expressing his hope that all priests may find here “a source of abundant faith and culture and a fraternal atmosphere, which will equip you to return to your homeland as chosen heralds of truth” (*Radio Message*, 7 October 1961). Thank you!
