



Homily in the Holy Mass of the Opening Celebration of the Quadracentennial of the Augustinian Recollect Missionary Presence in Cebu¹

by Most Rev. Jose S. Palma DD
Metropolitan Archbishop of Cebu

My dear brothers and sisters, God has gathered us today in this church of Virgen del Carmen of the Augustinian Recollects in the spirit of rejoicing and thanksgiving. As we gather, we can own the response to the Psalm: “Forever I will sing the goodness of the lord.”

The good Lord has accomplished His design that this year we celebrate the 400th Year of Recoletos’ presence in Cebu.

On behalf of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Cebu therefore and on my own, I would like to convey my congratulations and thanksgiving to the Order of Augustinian Recollects, today represented here by Rev. Fr. Leopoldo Estioko, the Prior of this community here and of Rev. Fr. Christopher Maspara, the President of USJ-R in Cebu City.



It is my joy and privilege as Archbishop of Cebu to greet the Order of Augustinian Recollects: “*Congratulations on the occasion of the Fourth*

¹ Delivered at the Eucharistic Sacrifice presided by Archbishop Palma and concelebrated by twenty-eight diocesan and religious priests at the parish church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parish-Recoletos, Magallanes Street, Cebu City on 29 April 2021. The text is transcribed from the videotaped Mass by Emmanuel Luis A. Romanillos for this anthology.

Centenary of your Missionary Presence in Cebu!” Congratulations! It is also my privilege to sincerely thank the Order of the Recollects and their brothers these past four hundred years for their ministry in Cebu. What a providential celebration that we celebrate the Fourth Centenary of their Missionary Presence in Cebu in the year when we in the Philippines celebrate the Fifth Centenary [of Christianity] and together with the Augustinian Recollects we can very well resonate with what we have sung in the Responsorial Psalm: “Forever I will sing, forever we will sing the goodness of the Lord.” It is the good Lord who has inspired their founder, our Father, the great Saint Augustine. And it is the Lord who has established their family as one of the big families in the Augustinian Order. It is the Lord who has inspired them to come to the Philippines four hundred fifteen years ago, [establishing themselves] first in Manila and, of course, shortly after in Cebu.

Today, as we invited you, today we sing the goodness of the Lord. And for this reason we can say that as we celebrate four hundred years of missionary presence, as they would say: “*Siempre en misión*” [Always in mission]. We know that during the year we will have an opportunity to know more and, of course, to be able to thank even more sincerely the good Lord for what He has done to the Order. But for the moment, as we reflect on the theme: *Upat ka gatus ka tuig sa pangsangyaw ug pagbag-o sa kinabuhi sa katawhan* [four hundred years of evangelization and transforming the people’s lives]. We praise God for the zeal, for the missionary zeal of proclaiming renewal. We thank You, Lord.

Dear brothers and sisters, today as we join them in giving praise to God and as we join our brothers in looking back and appreciating in many ways the example of their brothers who had been here during these past four hundred years, we pray that precisely because they have given this dedicated service so that they continue that mission for four hundred years more and beyond, that they continue that mission in their religious ministry as well as in the educational advocacy, that they continue to reflect on their vision and mission and we know what they are, namely, as they made mention: “To uplift the quality of life, to have a more enlightened national and local leadership and community involvement and to have dedicated religious and lay people to address poverty and social ills and education.” I thank Dr. Mila Espina for underlining this.

Karong adlaw [today] we look back and say: *Daghang kaayong salamat* [Thank you very much]! When I think of the eight parishes that

you have established in Cebu, starting from this lively Parish of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, when I think of what you have done that people may receive the Sacraments: how many thousands were baptized, how many couples were sanctified in marriage and families strengthened through the sacraments, confirmation, sacrament of the sick how many other ways of promoting and strengthening the community, so that they may grow in their faith and be enlivened in their love and be strengthened in their hope, when I think of how you catechize our people and how all of these bear fruits in our various communities, all we can say is: *Daghang kaayong salamat!*

The good Lord knows what you have done, but I know that if these were not Covid times many people would have been here, perhaps representatives from your parishes, but we could not do that. We have to be obedient children of God and citizens to observe social distancing and all of these protocols. But whether they are here or not, please know that they are people who are grateful to you, people who can certainly say that they appreciate your missionary spirit, your evangelizing presence. As we said, certainly you live out “*Siempre en misión.*”

We do not have to look far to be able to appreciate your presence. Attached to this big church is a university, and we are aware as well how the Order of Augustinian Recollects has made it side by side with their pastoral ministry the emphasis they give to education endeavor. The presence of USJ-R, for example, University of San Jose-Recoletos Main Campus, Basak and Balamban campuses is a testimony to the Order’s conviction when they would claim or proclaim that they may have not built structures whose skyscrapers and edifices crumble with the passing of time but then through education, having graduated thousands of young men and women, then they were instrumental in forming and training people—children of God whose destiny is eternity. To me, the thousands of students that have passed the portals of your university, the thousands of students are grateful because they received quality academic formation and religious formation. These are the students who became professionals and are now perhaps in other parts of the world grateful for what they have accomplished. They are the students who improved the quality of life of their families because they have studied at the University of San Jose-Recoletos. I’d like to thank you for that ministry. How often we emphasize amidst the many challenges of our country, amidst our many concerns, we know of the importance of education! And it is in this perspective that over

and over again we stress: “Thank you for your educational ministry and advocacy.”

Reflecting further on education considering the condition of our country, I’d like to speak it loud and clear to many students who may be able to hear the message. It is this emphasis on education that made me, on this occasion, declare without fear of contradiction that in the universities like USJ-R and in many other education institutions administered by the religious, for what the students pay and for what they achieve, certainly, the students would feel privileged they get more than they invested. In most of our educational institutions, especially in the provinces, we believe for what you pay you get more because relatively the tuition fees are low, if many in our educational institutions are privileged to study abroad and if we only know how much people pay in the United States, in Europe; here in the Philippines, they know that they are beneficiaries of the ministry of many religious congregations. They attain degrees and profession, they get a good quality education, and added to that is the formation of persons, or evangelical Christian formation. It makes me feel sad when I hear of people of small minds comment that Catholic Education exists for the sake of profit.

Again I would like to thank USJ-R or the Augustinian Recollects for their confidence and conviction that indeed, through educational ministry, they do a wonder evangelical and social service to the Church and community. And I say that you, brothers, running the University of San Jose-Recoletos, in behalf of the students, graduates, professionals and their families, again as Archbishop of Cebu, I say: “*Daghang kaayong salamat!*”

I ought to know and I made mention of your pastoral ministry but I feel I have to say this because Talavera Retreat House has been part of my journey as a bishop. When I was in Calbayog and in Palo, Leyte, we were regular retreatants of that retreat house. I know what it means... the spiritual growth, the spiritual nourishment. I know as well that when we are there we are reminded of the life of Saint Ezekiel Moreno. He might not have come to Cebu but he had gone to Negros and Iloilo, and of course, he was in Manila, but when we think of missionaries like him, I know that they carried, he carried your spirit and you carry as well the spirit “*siempre en misión,*” whether they be the parishes or the schools, you are sent as you made mention so that people would be challenged for renewal, for a better life, uplift the quality of life so that people also would be

enlightened and that your graduates would feel that they are challenged to be involved in order to address poverty and social ills and all the concerns of development and harmony.

We will be with you through the year and through this year, but for the moment, I just would like to take this occasion to join you in thanking the Lord for that inspiration to come to Cebu and for that missionary zeal to reach out to our people and for that desire to make a difference in the lives of people both in the parishes, in the mission areas, and I would also say in a special way in the educational advocacy.

As we continue this Mass, I feel doubly happy that the year when you celebrate the Fourth Centenary is the year that Pope Francis has declared as the *Year of Saint Joseph*. We know that Saint Joseph is the guardian of the University. Saint Joseph, being the patron, gives us this assurance and a reason to hope. Pandemic is still around but we believe through the intercession of Saint Joseph, we will overcome Covid and just as Saint Joseph took care of the Child Jesus and under his father love, the child grew in age, in wisdom and grace, we have reason to believe that the children, the students, the parish community will be safeguarded, especially our young people who may grow in age and wisdom, and we grow as a community. Like Saint Joseph, you become guardians of the people, you become guardians by being close to the Santo Niño, by being close to Mama Mary.

We have approved of consecrating *Nuestra Señora del Carmen*, the Immaculate Conception, Mama Mary here, because she is your Patroness, as a sign as well of her protection for you. Today, looking around on this 4th centenary of the Augustinian Recollect missionary presence, but even more significantly, looking into our hearts, we know the love of God, the love of Mama Mary, the protection of Saint Joseph, the spirit of trust in the Santo Niño are all found in us. The best antidote to Covid, says the Pope, the best reason to hope for a better tomorrow beyond 400 years of the Recoletos. And together with Saint Augustine, Saint Ezekiel Moreno, together with all of your confreres residing in Cebu and in the Philippines, together we will say, we will sing the goodness of the Lord. With you all we say, “Adelante, Order of Augustinian Recollects.” Amen..

Once more *Congratulations. Daghang kaayong salamat!*

