



And the Lord turned and looked at Peter... (Lk 22:61)

THE GAZE OF THE CRUCIFIED LORD

Love and Compassion, Forgiveness and Challenge

CBCP Message

Opening of the Year of the Poor 2015

When you gaze into the eyes of the Crucified Lord, and he gazes into yours, you encounter the love of the Resurrected Lord.ⁱ Many prefer not to look. Many recoil at looking into the eyes of a man in deadly pain. Many balk at having to respond to love. But these are not the eyes of a defeated man, condemned for criminal insurrection. They are the eyes of an unlikely King, who in dealing death its death blow, still looks into our eyes with challenge. In his love is his call to the Kingdom of his Father, his Kingdom of justice, compassion, peace and life to the full.

In the *sign* of this crucified Lord, now resurrected, we your Pastors, invite you to the celebration of the Year of the Poor.ⁱⁱ Behold Jesus, poor. No image of Jesus, poor, surpasses this one. Jesus hangs from his Cross stripped of his clothes, his dignity, his possessions, his power, his strength. He is fully one with the unwashed, the oppressed, the scorned, the powerless, the miserable, the outcaste. In the Year of the Poor, look into the eyes of the crucified Lord. There is no experience richer.

You who are poor...

In those eyes, you who are poor, feel his suffering-with-you. From his Cross, he walks with you through crowded alleys, stumbles on mud, recoils at the stench of unmoved sewerage. He bows to enter your makeshift home hobbled together from salvaged materials; it is for your family, but you share it perforce with rats and cockroaches, an oven in the hot season, a waterfall when rainy.

On his Cross, he is with you - God with you.ⁱⁱⁱ He has taken on your nakedness, your vulnerability, your hunger, your illness, your shame. You once thought you could escape the hardship of your rural beginnings. But your suffering only increased. Here, you cannot find the *camote* to chase the hunger from your belly; you cannot find the herbs to stop your baby's vomiting and diarrhea; you cannot find money even to keep your single bulb burning. Here, though amidst thousands, neighbors^{iv} are distant.

You were once grateful for the backbreaking work you finally found; your work continues to break your back, and bend you. But your debts just continue to grow. The clothes and shoes you bought last year to send your children to school are already worn out. In your home you have an altar. Mary is there. The *Nazareno* is there. So is the *Sto. Niño*. You pray. But you tremble when you hear the shouts of the demolition crews approaching. You cry out for mercy. You look into the eyes of your crucified King.



Looking into his eyes, you feel his gaze into your soul. You do not understand. Why the love for you, but a poor man? Why the energy from the Cross to convince you: you are loved? Why the persisting message like a mantra in the *sign* of the Cross: "*I have come to bring life, and bring life to the full,*"^v and, "*Blessed are you who are poor.... Blessed are you who hunger now... Blessed are you when men hate you...*"^{vi}

Why his silent acceptance of abuse, hatred, rejection, oppression and death in rejection of yours? Why his abiding identification with you, as he calls on his disciples to act in your aid? "*Whatever you do for this poor person, that you do for me. ... Whatever you do not do for this poor person, that you do not do for me?*"^{vii} Why, on your behalf, to any who follow him, his mandate to works of mercy? "Feed the hungry. Give drink to the thirsty. Clothe the naked. Shelter the homeless. Visit the sick. Ransom the captive. Bury the dead."^{viii} For the answers to these questions... look into his eyes, and search within.

You who are weary...

In the Year of the Poor, all you who labor and are heavily burdened, we your Pastors invite you, as Jesus himself did: come to Jesus. "*Come to me,*" Jesus said, "*and I will give you rest.*"^{ix} Life has not reduced you to penury, but life has not lifted you to wealth. To you also Jesus has said, "*I have come to give life, and to give it to the full.*"

Thinking of your families, your spouses, your children, the relatives who run to you for help in their unending need, you work long hours, you work overtime, you even take on second and third jobs, just to make ends meet. Often ends don't meet; demands exhaust you; your taskmasters overstress you; worries distress you.

But you labor on in love. Thinking of the smiles on your children's faces and the promises you have made your spouse to provide adequately, you work on, hoping your sacrifice will bring the full life that Jesus brings. Whenever you can, whenever you remember, you pray. You ask him to help. You ask his mother for help. He does help. She does come to your aid. You know that. Now, coming to Jesus hanging from his Cross, look into his eyes as he looks into yours with love.

You who are rich...

"I have come to bring life," he said, "life to the full." Some of you, sadly, are unmoved by this. You do not believe this. You do not believe Jesus brings anything. You say you do, but you don't.

For you, the fullness of life is the good life: your doing. It is not gifted, but taken. It is not brought to you as a blessing from above, but seized as a result of pushing and shoving from below. It is not selfless, but selfish. It is fueled by pride, scheming ambition, the exhilaration of power, the taste of blood. For this you work harder than hard, you push yourselves to the limit, you even push beyond the limit. To achieve "the sweet life," to outdo your ambitions, to over satiate your sycophants, to make them applaud without end, you abuse your bodies, you break the law, you violate your conscience; you ravage Creation. Your social life is your needy ego. You manipulate people, exploit their skills; take advantage of their weaknesses; pay them poorly. What is rightly theirs, you steal; what rightly belongs to society, you conceal. What is there for all, you hoard for yourself. For you, there is no common good, only your good!



You build your first house, then your second houses; you provide for your family, then for your second families. You fill your lives with deceit, hypocrisy, and misery, and so glory in your "good life." You take great satisfaction in that you are not like the rest of the rabble. You have no need for prayer; you have no need for God.

In this Year of the Poor, we your Pastors invite you, step back from the rat race, the pressure, the din. Step back, and look into the eyes of the King.

His gaze penetrates through your eyes to your heart. It is the same gaze of compassion as his gaze into the eyes of the poor. But it is a gaze altered by your own arrogance and cynicism. It is a gaze marked by concern. You may not wish to hear his message, but he says it again for you: *"Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe when society speaks well of you, for your fathers did the same to false prophets."*^x

He doesn't thunder this from loudspeakers, nor embarrass you with this in the media, for you are well-respected and honorable persons. He says it simply in his gaze, knowing fully you can reject it, as you have rejected it before.

But in the Year of the Poor, where so many poor are poor because of your decisions, he also reminds you that over concern with your humungous investments, your corporate takeovers, your capture of political power and your fine reputations to the detriment or negligence of the poor may have serious consequences. *"Whatever you have done or not done to one of these the least of my brothers and sisters, that you have done or not done to me."* For not feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, succoring the sick, sheltering the stranger, visiting the imprisoned, the Lord, the Just Judge, may say to you, *"Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire..."* for I was poor, and you did not care.

If you have trouble believing this, look into his eyes gazing at you from the Cross.

Behold Jesus poor...

If that gaze, filled with love, brings you to confusion, shame and repentance^{xi} in this Year of the Poor, then consider its urgent challenge for you:

With God's grace, turn away from your haughtiness, your pride, your selfishness, your idolatry of money, your all-consuming fascination with power. In love, work to build the Kingdom of God on earth!^{xii}

In the Philippines, this means, urgently: stop the corruption.

Stop the misuse of the People's funds. Stop the wanton destruction of the environment. Fight the poverty of the poor. Build vibrant companies that use our resources to create wealth for our people, but distribute that wealth equitably.^{xiii} Build an economy that responds to the unconscionable poverty of the fishermen, the tillers of the soil, the urban laborers. Build an economy that is open to the world, but whose benefits do not exclude the poor.^{xiv} Provide jobs.



Provide education that respects all our people as human beings and children of God, not just cogs in a global production machine. But provide education relevant to the fight against dehumanizing poverty: basic education to all, and higher education to all who desire it.^{xv} Build a society of dialogue in our diversity, and especially for our poor, build a society of peace.^{xvi} No more war, for the greatest victims of war are the poor!

Behold Jesus, hope of the poor...

If that gaze, filled with love, brings you in poverty to consolation, encouragement and peace, take heart in Jesus' love. He strengthens you, encourages you, and calls the Christian community to help you progress from destitution to the fullness of life.

But help the community in helping yourselves. Should you have no work, look for work. Should you have work, work well. Cultivate a personal sense of industry, self-respect and social responsibility. As the economy allows, continue to provide well for your family in love: nutritious food, adequate clothing, medical care, good education, wholesome recreation. Strive for conditions of work that are humane and just. Continue to contribute to the welfare of your neighbors, your barangay, your municipality, your city, your nation. Always be helpful. Vote as the common good demands. Together with your spouse, lead your children to the love and respect the Lord through our Catholic communion. Be active in your parish and in your basic ecclesiastical community. Love, as you are loved by God. Share courageously of your faith in love! You are not just receivers of the Gospel. You are its bearers!^{xvii}

Shepherds looking into the eyes of the Good Shepherd...

Finally, in the year of the poor, we your pastors, and with us, all priests and religious, look with you into the eyes of the crucified Lord. How often it is that we have look into those tortured eyes and failed to notice their twinkle! We have seen only embarrassing defeat, jaded suffering and obvious dying, but failed to notice the light that pierces the gloom in our hearts.^{xviii}

In the void that loneliness and isolation brought by our distance from Crucified, we can be misled to fill the gaping abyss with new phones and ipads. We can cover the gaping vacuum with another luxury car or designer jeans or more fashionable shoes more than our shoe racks can contain; with a vacation out of the country or another gadget for the bedroom. We can hold on to the whisky bottle and hope that the bottled spirit will exorcise the spirit of boredom in us. It can also be filled up by working like a horse to impress the people, to create a fans' club and move you up higher to a better assignment. It can also increase our interest in bank savings, the stock market and the accumulation of more properties. Church funds and personal funds are deliberately mixed up. The parish crawls in financial difficulties while we sprint and jump with financial security. Our easy and comfortable lifestyles can make us numb to the peril of worldliness. It can make us at ease with ecclesiastical vanities.

How often have we reduced his living eyes to painted plastic on a wall, and deprived ourselves of feeling what those eyes twinkling in passion convey: that we are noticed, appreciated, valued, and sent forth. In so doing, we have cheated ourselves of the only treasure in our calling: the felt certainty from the Cross that we are each individually and totally loved.



We have exchanged this prize, this pearl of great price^{xix}, for the compulsive conservation of conceptual castles, for the anxious pettiness of rules and regulations, for the obsessive preservation of a pecking order, for the selfish defense of private space, for the eccentric collection of quaint things, as well as for the lifelong preparation for our retirement.^{xx}

Or, we have exchanged this self-emptied Messiah for self-established messiahs on distinguished thrones, ourselves rejecting the folly of the Cross, preferring the authority of feared prelates or the renown of pious celebrity or the fashionable cynicism of the insecure. For these recognized spiritual professionals, there is really no need for prayer, no need for prophets, and certainly no need for the unlettered and unwashed, for all ultimately is about themselves.^{xxi}

Look at Jesus...

In this year of the poor, we too are being asked in silence to peer into the eyes of the crucified Lord, not plastic, nor wooden, nor closed, but open for me, confusing me, disturbing me, returning me to an original inspiration, healing me, raising me up, making me whole and surprising me anew with unaccustomed joy. In those twinkling eyes, we consider the quiet invitation to be actually poor, one with him, stripped of his clothes, his dignity, his possessions, his power, his strength, one with the unwashed, the oppressed, the scorned, the powerless, the miserable, the outcaste. Of course, we can say *no*. We can repeat the valid, reasonable excuses. But we can also say *yes*.

In this Year of the Poor, may our neediness be turned to sanctity, and may our arrogance be turned to service.^{xxii} In all, may the love of the Crucified Lord triumph as he gazes into our hearts and we dare to look into his.

Amen. Amen.

For the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, November 30, 2014 First Sunday of Advent

+SOCRATES B. VILLEGAS
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CBCP President

ⁱ cf. *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*: Colloquy of the First Exercise.

ⁱⁱ In the nine year preparation for the celebration of the 500th Anniversary of Christianity in the Philippines, the *Year of the Poor* (2015) follows the *Year of Faith* (2013) and the *Year of the Laity* (2014).

ⁱⁱⁱ cf. Matthew: 1:23

^{iv} cf. Luke: 10:29

^v John 10:10.

^{vi} Luke 6: 20-23

^{vii} cf. Matthew 25:40, 45.



viii The Church's *Corporal Works of Mercy* are inspired by Matthew 25:31-46

ix Matthew 11:28

x Luke 6:24-26.

xi *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*: Confusion, shame and repentance are graces of the First Week.

xii cf. Mark 9:34. Also: "Through the gift of his Spirit and the conversion of hearts, [Jesus] comes to establish the 'Kingdom of God', so that a new manner of social life is made possible, in justice, in brotherhood, solidarity and sharing. The Kingdom inaugurated by Christ perfects the original goodness of the created order and of human activity" Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church (CSDC) #325.

xiii cf. CSDC, 330-345.

xiv cf. CSDC, 361-373. Also: Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, #54: "No to an economy of exclusion."

xv cf. CSDC, 375-376.

xvi cf. CSDC, 494-495.

xvii Cf. PCP II. The Poor are not only objects but vigorous agents of evangelization. "The 'Church of the Poor' will also mean that the Church will not only evangelize the poor, but that the poor in the Church will themselves become evangelizers. Pastors and leaders will learn to be with work with and learn from the poor. A 'Church of the Poor' will not only render preferential service to the poor but will practice preferential reliance on the poor in the work of evangelization" (PCP II, 132)

xviii In *Evangelii Gaudium*, 1-3, Pope Francis invites all to return to the joy of the Gospel, to "embark upon a new chapter of evangelization marked by this joy" (EG, 1). Unto this end, he says, "I invite all Christians everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least to an openness to letting him encounter them" (EG, 3).

xix cf. Mt. 13:46

xx compare: *Temptations Faced by Pastoral Workers*, EG, 76-109

xxi "Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor" (EG, 2)

xxii cf. CBCP, Lenten Message, 2014