

# Pope praises Filipino Catholics as joyful witnesses of the Gospel

The joy of the Gospel has been an integral part of the Filipino identity since the arrival of Christianity in the Southeast Asian country five centuries ago, Pope Francis said.

Commemorating the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Christianity in the Philippines March 14, the pope told members of Rome's Filipino community that evangelical zeal is a "part of your genes, a blessed 'infectiousness' that I urge you to preserve."

"I have often said that here in Rome, Filipino women are 'smugglers' of faith! Because wherever they go to work, they sow the faith," he said.

Because of COVID-19 restrictions, fewer than 200 representatives of the city's Filipino community could attend the Mass at the Altar of the Chair in St. Peter's Basilica. Filipino Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle, president of Caritas Internationalis and prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, thanked the pope for the celebration.

The Christian faith, he told the pope, is a source of strength and comfort for countless Filipino men and women who work abroad to support their families.

According to a survey conducted by the Philippine Statistics Authority, 2.2 million Filipino citizens worked overseas and sent an estimated 211.9 billion pesos (\$12.8 billion Cdn) to their families in 2019.

"We have left our families, not to abandon them, but to care for them and their future. For love of them, we endure the sorrow of separation," Cardinal Tagle told the pope.

Holding back tears, the cardinal said that in the absence of their families, Filipino migrants find solace in their local parishes which they see as a "second home."

"When there is no one to talk with, we pour our hearts to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and ponder his word," he said. "We take care of the children under our charge as our own children, and the elderly as our own parents."

In his homily, Pope Francis reflected on the Sunday Gospel reading from St. John in which Jesus tells Nicodemus that "God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten son."

Christ's words, he said, "help us to see the true face of God" who "always

looked at us with love, and for the sake of love, he came among us in the flesh of his son.”

“If hearing the Gospel and practicing our faith do not enlarge our hearts and make us grasp the immensity of God’s love – maybe because we prefer a glum, sorrowful and self-absorbed religiosity – then this is a sign that we need to stop and listen once more to the preaching of the Good News,” the pope said. “God loves you so much that he gave you his entire life.”

Christians, he added, are also called to make an act of selfless love that “offers itself, gives itself, expends itself” to others.

“That is the power of love: it shatters the shell of selfishness, breaks our carefully constructed security zones, tears down walls and overcomes fears so as to give freely of itself,” the pope said. “That is what love does: it gives itself.”

Pope Francis encouraged Filipino Catholics to continue being witnesses of Gospel joy and thanked them for “the joy you bring to the whole world and to our Christian communities.”

The message of God’s love, he added, “cries out to be expressed in love” and is at the heart of the church’s mission “to care for those who are hurting and living on the fringes of life.”

“The church is called not to judge but to welcome; not to make demands, but to sow seeds; not to condemn, but to bring Christ who is our salvation,” the pope said.