

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER (YEAR B)

April 25, 2021

Acts of the Apostles 4:8–12 • 1 John 3:1–2 • John 10:11–18

I.

Today, the Fourth Sunday of Easter,
is known as Good Shepherd Sunday,
and is the World Day of Prayer for Vocations.

For me, among many other things,
my 15 years in the priesthood have been an education in humanity.

I've been assigned to five parishes,
each of them different communities
with different histories, cultures, challenges, aspirations, and so forth.

Part of that experience has also been the ethnic diversity of the Catholic Church.

By way of example,
three of those five parishes have had large Hispanic communities.

Before coming to Richmond,
I was the pastor of Sacred Heart parish in Danville,
which is located on the border of Virginia and North Carolina.

Interestingly, there was also good-size Filipino community in that parish.

I remember being invited by a Filipino family to dinner, and when I arrived,
I was taken aback that the whole Filipino community was there!

Everyone knew each other.

You might be wondering why there was such a large Filipino community there.

And it was multi-generational,
as the first generation had come to work as doctors and nurses,
and now their children were grown and were growing up.

They were integral and supportive members of the parish.

When I left Sacred Heart in Danville,
the Filipino community insisted on throwing a party for me.

They put together a slide show and a photo album that I still have.

II.

I'm thinking of them because yesterday at the Cathedral,
there was a beautiful diocesan Mass to celebrate a monumental anniversary:
500 years of Christianity in the Philippines.

In a sense,
the story of the faith of those Filipino parishioners in Danville
begins with the voyage of Ferdinand Magellan in 1521.

Magellan, you may know,
was a Portuguese explorer who sailed for Spain.

Spain sought a westerly route,
outside the Portuguese sphere of influence,
to the lucrative Spice Islands of Indonesia.

Magellan's voyage ended up circumnavigating the globe—
a first in world history.

But the part of the story that is usually untold is that this voyage brought the
Christian faith to an Asian archipelago that was first named after St. Lazarus,
whom Christ raised from the dead.

Magellan planted the cross on the island of Cebu the day before the Fifth Sunday
of Lent, when the Gospel about Lazarus is read.

(Later, the name *Las Islas Filipinas* was given in honor of Prince Philip,
heir to the Spanish throne.)

As the story goes,
Magellan and his men were able to cure the ill son of the local chieftain
and his wife,
which prompted their conversion to Christianity.

In 1565, the conquistador Miguel López de Legazpi came to Cebu.

The indigenous persons burned their huts and fled,
but in one of those houses a statue of the Christ Child—
in Spanish, *Santo Niño*—
was recovered.

That statue, a replica of which is the sanctuary,
was remembered as the baptismal gift of Magellan to the local king and queen.

The Filipino people have venerated this image with great devotion
for 500 years.

The evangelization of the Philippines unfolded over centuries,
and was linked to the *conquista* or conquest by Spain.

That process featured both lights and shadows.

Significantly, religious orders, beginning with the Augustinian friars,
played a leading role in teaching the Catholic faith in the Philippines,
and many of them defended the local populations
from the abuses of the Spanish colonial regime.

Eventually, a native-born clergy developed in the Philippines.

Today, the Philippines is missionary in another sense.

What began as a mission field
is today the third-largest Catholic country in the world,
and the largest Catholic country in Asia.

Right here in the Diocese of Richmond,
we have more than a dozen Filipino priests serving in our parishes.

And it's significant, too, that in Rome,
the cardinal in charge of foreign missions—
the Pontifical Council for the Evangelization of Peoples—
is a Filipino.

III.

The 500th anniversary of the arrival of Christianity in the Philippines is a story of mission.

That mission originates with the Good Shepherd himself, as we hear in the Gospel:

“I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. These also I must lead, and they will hear my voice, and there will be one flock, one shepherd.”

Being a Christian is to know and to love Jesus Christ—to live one’s life completely for him, just he laid down his life for us.

This is what it means to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd:

“I am the good shepherd, and I know mine and mine know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I will lay down my life for the sheep.”

The Church is the flock of the Good Shepherd, to which all people are meant to belong.

The diversity of the Catholic Church emphasizes that goal and reality.

As St. Peter declares in the First Reading, from the Acts of the Apostles,

“There is no salvation through anyone else, nor is there any other name under heaven given to the human race by which we are to be saved.”

The whole Church gives thanks to God for the faith of the Filipino people over the course of five centuries.

It is a profound witness that the Gospel is meant for all people, and that each person is a missionary.