

DIE WITH ME AND LIVE FOREVER!

Easter Message of Archbishop Socrates B. Villegas on April 16, 2017 delivered at Saint John Cathedral Dagupan City

As I looked at our churches and chapels filled with devoted people during Holy Week, I asked myself “How many more of such *Katoliko sarado* and faithful parishioners do we really have now?”

How many of our Catholic countrymen fully believe in the Catholic teachings and live by the same Catholic moral principles? How many of our Catholics openly and blatantly declare “*I am a Catholic but I agree that drug addicts must be killed; they are useless. I am a Catholic but I am pro death penalty. I am a Catholic but I favor gay marriages. I am a Catholic but I do not always obey my bishop who is too old fashioned. I am a priest but my bishop’s circulars are optional for obedience. I am a Catholic congressman but I when I vote on bills, the budget allocation for my projects are primary not my conscience. I am a Catholic but I do not mind if the Pope is called son of a prostitute. I am a Catholic and I bash the CBCP on social media. I am a Catholic but I share fake news. I am a Catholic but I am not against corruption in government as long as they help the poor.*”

“I am a Catholic but I disagree when bishops talk about social issues and ecology concerns. The Church should not interfere in politics. There is separation of Church and State after all. Give to Ceasar what is Ceasar’s and to God what is God’s. I am a Catholic but...I am a Catholic but...”

In Syria and Nigeria, in Egypt and Lebanon, in China and Myanmar, Christians suffer for the faith, endure persecution and embrace their fate of martyrdom until now. They endure the traditional way of blood shedding by torture or by solitary isolation or by the bullet. Their tormentors do not share their beliefs. They live in a society that is angry at God and suspicious of churchmen.

In the Philippines we declare we are Christians. We are Catholics. The baptismal certificate is presented before weddings. We have fiestas and processions. We have Catholic schools and we make pilgrimages. We have priests at funerals and we go to Manaoag.

In the Philippines, we are Catholics. We do not kill bishops and priests in the Philippines. We bash bishops. We allow our idols to curse the Pope. We make fake news about one another. We remain safely anonymous in hidden Facebook and Twitter accounts. We earn our living by working as social media trolls. This is better than drugs and stealing, isn’t it?

We bishops have become martyrs in social media. We are killed a thousand times; our trolls are in the thousands. When we speak they want us muted.

When we oppose they want us maimed. When we stand for life, they want us dead.

What has happened to us?

Some of my friends from other countries say they are worried about the government of the Philippines. I answered them I am not worried about government. I am more worried about my countrymen. How have we a Catholic nation become like this as a people?

We have become uncaring for one another. We are proud to be critical without rhyme or reason. We walk not forward but backwards becoming day by day an angry society. I thank God that my parents did not live long enough to see these days when their bishop son is ridiculed and rebuked and his priests are ignored and suspected. Churchmen are called the worst hypocrites and if my mother heard such, I am sure she would cry in pain. Our parishioners seek the security of silence with no one willing to defend Christ's anointed ones. "For if they do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?" (Luke 23:31)

Am I hurt? Yes. Am I angry? No. Am I aware of the calumnies they hurl against me? Yes and I read all of them. Shall I give up? No. How do I feel? Fully at peace!

Pope Benedict XVI told us bishops *"Readiness to suffer belongs to the bishop's job description. Precisely in this way the bishop is in communion with His Master. Precisely in this way, he knows himself to be a servant of joy."*

The Book of Sirach advises us, *Stand up for what is right, even it costs your life; the Lord God will be fighting on your side (4:28)*

We are indeed entering a new chapter in our history as a Catholic nation when it is so fashionable to make churchmen the punching bag of public officials to the glee of our own parishioners. We are humiliated and despised. We are calumniated as having many wives and the accuser is immune from legal suit. Bishops and priests are wronged and no one dares to set things right.

The Church is ridiculed and her churchmen are rebuked. Christ's teachings are relentlessly challenged. Human life is cheaper than a gun. God's mercy is disdained and scorned.

Like Saint Paul, "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. (2 Cor 4:8-10)

If the fashion of rebuffing Church morals and doctrine does not cease, we will see less and less priests and bishops reaching old age and more and more priests and bishops dying as martyrs at the prime of their lives if not in this generation maybe, maybe in the next. Pray I am wrong.

If this should happen: Stand up and take courage. Go to jail for the sake of the Gospel. Be ready to be killed for the sake of our faith. The Church will not die when Christ's believers are killed. The Catholic faith will bloom, grow and glow. What we cannot do in life as Catholics, we will be able to do when they kill us and make us martyrs. First they will kill our name. Then they will destroy our beliefs. Then they will kill our body. But no one can stop our hearts from beating only for God.

Another patriot in our midst challenged us:

“We should not wait until the ‘sea of ethics’ runs dry, nor should we allow the navy captain to altogether dismantle the ‘lighthouse’ that gets in his way.”

The Church is under persecution. The signs are clear. The teachings of God on life and family are under attack. Do not let evil intimidate you. Do not let their threats silence the priests and bishops. This is not the time for cowards. This is the ripe season for martyrs. This is a moment of glory.

As the Lord told his disciples in the Garden of Olives, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Behold, the hour is at hand when the Son of Man is to be handed over to sinners. [Get up, let us go. Look, my betrayer is at hand.](#)” (Mt. 26:45-46)

I close this Easter meditation with the immortal lines of the Man from La Mancha:

I know if I'll only be true
To this glorious quest
That my heart will lie peaceful and calm
When I'm laid to my rest
And the world will be better for this
That one man, scorned and covered with scars
Still strove with his last ounce of courage
To reach the unreachable star!

If you die with Christ, you will live forever. Do not be afraid.
Christ has conquered death....! Alleluia He is risen!