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“Presence itself is the answer” -- Pope Francis in the Philippines

Remembering special moments of Pope Francis' trip to the Philippines in January 2015 highlighting his human and spiritual concern for his Filipino children... and grandchildren (who called him “Lolo Kiko”)

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POPE FRANCIS' DEATH early on Easter Monday revived memories of encounters with him among people of various nationalities and from all walks of life.

ACI Africa noted in a recent social media post that as soon as he heard that Pope Francis had passed away, South Sudan President Salva Kiir Mayardit recalled the extraordinary gesture the Holy Father made when they met in Rome, as the latter knelt and kissed his feet and those of his rival, Vice-President Riek Machar Teny, appealing for an end to that country's civil war. "It goes without saying that South Sudan had a special spot in the heart of His Holiness, Pope Francis," the post quoted President Kiir as saying.

The Holy Father was genuinely so universal and so very sincere that, in all probability, citizens of all 68 countries he visited in the 47

“apostolic journeys” in his 12-year pontificate would say the same thing, their varied circumstances notwithstanding.

But Filipinos would be glad to know that Pope Francis could not help but fondly remember the rock-star welcome he got everywhere he went during his four-day visit to the Philippines on January 15-19, 2015. The Santisimo Rosario Parish at the University of Santo Tomas (UST) in the Philippines recalled in an April 25 social media post that the Holy Father, speaking in Italian to a general audience at St. Peter’s Square two months after returning from the Philippines (the post included a link to the voice clip), said to the delight of those listening: **“When I was in the Philippines, the Filipino people greeted me, saying ‘Lolo Kiko’ — meaning Grandpa Francis — ‘Lolo Kiko’, they said!”**

News on TV and other media have lately featured interviews with ordinary folk who encountered “Lolo Kiko” in those days, as well as in Rome on other occasions.

Now is as good a time as any to revisit Pope Francis’ 2015 journey to the Philippines.

HIGHLIGHTS

Meeting with Families at the SM Mall of Asia Arena in Pasay City, Metro Manila, Jan. 16, 5:30 p.m.

In this late afternoon gathering, the Holy Father listened to testimonies of various families regarding their joys and struggles in living their faith and life in general in the face of challenges like poverty and migration of those who needed to work overseas in order to make ends meet.

In the face of the lamentable situation of parents being separated from their families and the promotion of foreign ideologies that destroy the family, the Pope encouraged Filipino families to be steeped in prayer and to preserve family unity.

“Protect your families! See in them your country’s greatest treasure and nourish them always by prayer and the grace of the sacraments,” the Holy Father said. **“Be living examples of love, forgiveness and care.”**

Mass and meeting in Tacloban City with survivors of Super typhoon Yolanda, Jan. 17, 9:30 a.m.

Perhaps one of the more poignant moments of the 2015 papal visit happened in the morning Pope Francis spent with survivors of Super Typhoon Yolanda, internationally known as Haiyan, a Category 5 storm

that killed an estimated 6,300 people and injured more than 28,000 others when it raced through central Philippines in early November 2013.

Clad in a yellow raincoat, he addressed the huge crowd that had gathered in the rain at the Tacloban airport for the open air Mass. **“Let me tell you something personal – when I witnessed his disaster from Rome, I felt that I had to be here. That is when I decided to come here. I wanted to come to be with you. Maybe you will tell me that I came a little late; that is true, but here I am!”** he said, to applause from those who had gathered.

And in what would become a resounding message throughout his visit, the Holy Father continued: **“So many of you have lost everything. I do not know what to tell you. But surely He knows what to tell you! So many of you have lost members**

of your family. I can only be silent; I accompany you silently, with my heart...”

Tragedy struck that afternoon, as the winds caused a speaker tower at the Mass site to fall on and kill 27-year-old Catholic Relief Services volunteer, Kristel Mae Padasas, a BS Psychology graduate of Adamson University in Metro Manila.

The Pope sought a private audience with the girl's father the following day in Manila where they prayed together. Kristel was an only child. Her mother, who was then working in Hong Kong, rushed home after the incident.

In recent days, Kristel's father, Jun, told Reuters that he was “heartbroken” by news of the Pope's death. At the same time, Jun said that he was “heartened that, maybe, they (Pope Francis and Kristel) will finally get to meet”, asking his daughter to

“accompany him to the kingdom of Jesus...”

Encounter with the youth at the UST in Metro Manila, Jan. 18

This get together with thousands of young people centered on the story of a 12-year-old former street child, Glyzelle Palomar, who asked the Pope in tears: “Why does God allow something like this to happen, even if it is not the fault of the children? And why are there so few people helping us?”

A visibly moved Pope replied: **“She today asked the one question that doesn’t have an answer. And she couldn’t say it in words. She had to say it with tears.”**

“Why do children suffer? Only when our hearts can ask this question and weep, can we begin to understand.”

Thus, he urged the youth there to learn not just with their heads, but also with their hearts.

Rising from his seat, he approached and hugged Glyzelle and 14-year-old Jun Chura, who had also narrated his experience on the street. Both were under the care of the Tulay ng Kabataan Foundation (ANAK-Tnk) which rescues street children. A former ANAK-Tnk resident, Darwin Ramos, who died at 18 years of age in September 2012 from complications from Duchenne muscular dystrophy, was declared a Servant of God in 2019.

The Holy Father had actually made an unscheduled stop at the ANAK-Tnk house in Metro Manila on Jan. 16 — the first day of his visit — which had also been marked by a reception with then President Benigno S.C. “Noy” Aquino III in Malacañan Palace. What was then supposed to

be just a 2-minute stop at ANAK-Tnk stretched to 20 minutes, as the Pope listened to stories and songs from about 320 children there, Fr.

Matthieu Dauchez, the foundation's executive director, recalled in a TV interview a few days ago.

***Papal Mass at Quirino
Grandstand, Rizal Park, Metro
Manila, Jan. 18, 3:30p.m.***

Nearly 7 million Filipinos endured pouring rain to attend this Mass, making it the biggest papal gathering in history so far, surpassing even Saint Pope John Paul II's World Youth Day Mass in 1995 that drew an estimated 5 million people.

In his homily, Pope Francis spoke of Filipinos' faith, joy, and courage through trials. He exhorted the Filipino faithful to protect the family, the church, and all of humanity from **“the devil, the father of lies.”**

He ended with a blessing: “May the Santo Niño continue to bless the Philippines and to sustain the Christians of this great nation in their vocation to be witnesses and missionaries of the joy of the Gospel, in Asia and in the whole world.”

ENDURING LESSON

Besides the call to protect the family in a country with a promising relatively young population but where many are forced to leave their families for jobs abroad, there is one other message that marked Pope Francis’s 2015 visit to the Philippines.

And it is one that will come in handy in those moments with family members or friends who seek consolation amid daunting difficulties.

Looking back to those days in 2015, ANAK-Tnk’s Fr. Dauchez said it best:

when in the recent interview he recalled that while Pope Francis admitted that he did not have the answer to Glyzelle's question — nor to the tragedy that struck Yolanda's victims — his actions showed that “perhaps, presence itself is the answer” whenever words fail or fall short.

Edited by WGR and staff writers

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