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Opening Remarks
BUILDING COMMUNION, LIVING COMMUNION IN MISSION
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Good Afternoon! Thank you for being here! I am really happy that you are here! I hope that you are also happy that I am here! (Tell the person beside you, the one on your left and the one on your right that you are indeed happy that he / she is here). Let us pray that this meeting be for all of us an opportune time to deepen communion among us, to see that we are called to be servants of communion and to be witnesses together to the Communion that God desires for the Church and for the whole of humanity.

In celebrating 2017 as the Year of the Parish, the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) has declared that we should “more deeply discern not only the structures of governance of our dioceses and parishes but also of the quality of faith life in the parish, the fellowship, belongingness, and participation experienced by its members”. We shall focus on building the parishes as truly faith communities immersed in the lives of its people.

With the theme Parish as communion of communities, the celebration will highlight on building and living communion in the different levels of communities: the family, the neighborhood, the faith communities, the ministries and apostolates, the mandated organizations and ecclesial movements. It is living communion day in

and day out in the church, from its smallest unit to the parish and the diocese. It is living like one big family under one Father. It is communion!

COMMUNION IN SCRIPTURES AND CONTEMPORARY CHURCH DOCUMENTS

The Scriptures gives us different models of communion. But the strongest expression of which is the communion lived by the apostles and disciples after that great Sunday of Easter.

In Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-35, this communion of the early Easter people is characterized by common worship, common formation and service. They were of “one heart and one soul”. They listened and bore witness to the story of the Resurrection. And everything they owned was put at the service of all depending on their needs.

The first two are quite easy for the Christians today. Our churches are still full to the brim on Sundays, even on Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays. (Although there is a recent finding according UP sociologist and researcher that there is a significant decline of our Mass goers from 60% to 40 %. We do not notice it because this would mean still 32 Thousand.) But even these full packed celebrations are lacking in communion. Ash Wednesdays and Palm Sundays are chaotic in some churches as catholics tried to outpace one another for the imposition of ash on their foreheads and blessing of palms. Concern for others is absent in most of our moments of worship. How many churches today are faced with the problem of people lining up for communion like desperate passengers trying to get a ride or victims of disaster forcing themselves at the front of the line

for some food and survival kits. Some define our worshipping community as mob, far from being a community.

Putting our blessings together at the service of the community is also a challenge because of man's desire to insure his future and that of his family. Materialism has taught us that survival of the fittest is the game in a highly competitive world. We can still share but only up to the point where our personal and family's stake is safe. The woman who dropped her last penny into the donation box in the temple as told in the New Testament seems to be still a very rare experience that we still have to highlight to teach this very important lesson.

Meanwhile, Vatican II, as if to emphasize this common character of the community of the early Easter people, defines the Church as a "sacrament and instrument of communion with God and unity among all men". *Lumen Gentium*, in defining the mission and nature of the Church, speaks first and above all of the "mystery" of the Church. This divine dimension proceeds from the Trinitarian missions of the Son and the Spirit in history: "The Spirit dwells in the Church and in the hearts of the faithful, as in a temple (cf. 1 Cor 3:16; 6:19).... He both equips and directs with hierarchical and charismatic gifts and adorns with his fruits (cf. Eph 4:11-12; 1 Cor 12:4; Gal 5:22).... Thus, the Church has been seen as 'a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit'" (LG 4).

While the council fathers took note of communion as essential character of the Church, at the same time, they admitted that "while men of the present day are drawn ever more closely together by social, technical and cultural bonds, it still remains for them to achieve full unity in Christ" (*Lumen Gentium* 1)

Never before had it been easier for us to connect to one another regardless of distance. Technology has brought us closer to one another. Yet, this closeness

has not so far been successful in providing the highway, to use the modern language, to lead us to the fullness of our unity in Christ.

The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines, echo the Acts of the Apostles and Lumen Gentium on communion. “In community a Christian grows in faith. We are called as individuals, and each one must give a personal response. But Christ calls us to form a Christian community. He wants the Church to be “a communion of life, love and truth” (LG 9) “a community of faith, hope and charity” (LG 8). The first disciples expressed this in their own lives. They formed a community in which they “devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers” (Acts 2:42). They were “one heart and mind” and shared even the things they owned so that no one among them was in want (Acts 4:32-35).” (PCP II 89-90).

This was also reiterated by St. John Paul II in his apostolic letter, *Nuovo Millennio Ineunte*: “The great challenge facing the Church at the beginning of the new millennium is to make the Church the home and school of communion. Before making practical plans, we need to promote a spirituality of communion which means (a) contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity dwelling in us, (b) ability to think of our brothers and sisters in faith within the profound unity of the Mystical Body, (c) the ability to see what’s positive in others, to welcome it and prize it as a gift from God, (d) to know how to ‘make room’ for our brothers and sisters, bearing ‘each others’ burdens’, and resisting selfish temptations which constantly beset us and provoke competition, careerism, distrust and jealousy”(NMI, 43).

BUILDING COMMUNION, LIVING COMMUNION

Communion is the very essence of our life. This is exactly what the African word "UBUNTU" means: 'I am because we are.' In this way, we understand ourselves in relation with the world or with others. In the philosophy of *Ubuntu*, it is believed that there is a common bond that exists between all of us and it is through this bond, through our interaction with our fellow human beings, that we discover our own human qualities and fully realize ourselves. For Desmond Tutu (an anthropologist who studied the habits and customs of an African tribe), "*Ubuntu* speaks particularly about the fact that you can't exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness. You can't be human all by yourself, and when you have this quality – *Ubuntu* – you are known for your generosity. We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas we are connected and what we do affects the whole World. When you do well, it spreads out; it is for the whole of humanity."

Communion has two dimensions: communion with God and unity with our fellow. This is best expressed, rather symbolically, in our Eucharistic celebration. We commune with the Lord as we gather in the presence of God and one another, listen to the stories of our salvation and share the Eucharistic bread. Then we are sent back into the world to live Christian life and proclaim the message of Christ and, therefore, unite with the brethren.

In this dynamic movement of coming together and going forth, symbolized in the rites of gathering and dismissal that frame the Mass, we get a grasp of what it is to be Church. We have the basic elements for a theology of the Church. In theological categories, those basic elements may be termed "communion" and "mission". Pope John Paul II said, "Communion and mission are profoundly connected with each other, they interpenetrate and mutually imply each other to

the point that *communion represents both the source and the fruit of mission: communion gives rise to mission and mission is accomplished in communion.*"

Before I conclude, I just want to remind you that during this year we are all invited to consciously be aware that the Church is Home and School of Communion, therefore in our life we should show communion, participation, unity and love. Let us be so united like God, the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit. Are you aware that the highest point of the expression of communion of Jesus to the Father and to humanity was when he died on the cross and gave His all to His Father and to us. The teaching about the Trinity speaks of the Father as giving His all to the Son from all eternity. ... walang itinira sa sarili... ito din sana ang maging sukatan natin sa pagbibigay para sa ganap na pagkakaisa sa Diyos, sa isa't isa at sa mga taong binigay sa atin upang paglingkuran: buhos, taos, lubos at ubos! The challenge in building and living communion is the readiness to give all to and receive all from one another.

St. Teresa of Calcutta when once she met Chiara Lubich, the foundress ng Focolare Movement told her: *"What you have, I do not have! What I have, you do not have! But together we can make beautiful things for the Lord."* Together we want to make beautiful things for the Lord. Each has his own talents and treasures, each has his/her wealth of experiences but we have a common desire- to be witnesses of communion for God.

May the Lord bless the Church with workers who are truly agents or servants of communion, participation and mission. Amen.