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Montfortian Priest Recollects Mary with Synodal Lenses

QUEZON CITY, Philippines – In this season of Advent, the Association of Mary, Queen of All Hearts (AMQAH), together with Montfort Missionaries, spearheaded a recollection with the theme, *A Recollection of Mary "Living out the Vision of the Synodal Church: Journeying in communion from darkness to light"* last December 4, 2021, at the Montfort Center of Spirituality, Scout Madrinan, Quezon City.

The recollection master, Fr. Sherwin Nuñez, SMM, wasted no time in making known his (and fellow Montfortians') love for Mary, why they follow and imitate her, and could not take her out of the recollection, even if the theme was "Living Out the Vision of a Synodal Church: Journeying in Communion from Darkness to Light." The theme is the very message of Advent, he said, for us to be able to see the One that we are waiting for - the Messiah, Jesus Christ. To situate his audience to it, he wanted them to watch the video "Pasko ng Paglaya" but the player would not cooperate, so he skipped it and proceeded. He explained that while Advent is a period of waiting, what are we supposed to do in place of the celebrations of the Church which we are so used to already and, therefore, neglect because of familiarity. He decided to use the lenses of the synod (a big event in 2023) to realize, see, and be guided by our reflections and meditations on it

for the rest of Advent. Some of the questions to ponder over are: What is our role in a synodal Church? How does Advent prepare us to be part of the preparations of the Church for it?

He said Mary is included because she is an essential part of the reflections on what the challenges of Advent are, some of the themes of the synod, and our TTJ new format viz the Church's mission. He mentioned the letter of St. Paul to the Thessalonians, exhorting them to do more than a loving neighbor, in preparation for Christ's coming, as a way of looking and loving someone important. Just like what Fr. Fed echoed in his homily at Mass earlier, the reason why we joyfully wait, remember, celebrate, and look forward to His arrival. A kind of practice as well for His real, second coming, which is an active hope because darkness will lead to light, underscored in the first reading from prophet Isaiah, that we may not lose sight of the path.

Synod, Fr. Sherwin posited, is a merger of two Greek words, "syn" (with) and "hodos" (road), which produced "journeying together." The journey is no longer limited to bishops, priests, and deacons but involves the people of God in a "Simbahang naglalakbay" in communion, participation, and mission. How? By listening to one another and to the Holy Spirit, because a synodal Church is a missionary structure whose doors are open, a prophetic sign and a most evident way to be the universal sacrament of salvation. Like the Gospel, the coming of Christ is healing the sick, not leaving them behind, not choosing the lesser evil but one who is not and has no evil. It doesn't matter that one is weak, as long as one is without sin and does not choose whom to open the doors. According to the improved TTJ manual of Fr. Mario Belotti, our call is to be able to journey together as one Church that seeks the light of Christ towards her and her open doors. And he projected the first questions: Who do we journey with? Why? And whom did we neglect or leave behind? Ms. Liza was the brave one who came forward and answered. She journeys with the Legionaries. She offered a task she upholds being the President of Senatus of Northern Philippines (SNP) and, because of the many responsibilities the position entailed, neglected her family, particularly her husband who, she admitted, ought to be first and foremost of her concerns. Fr. Sherwin processed her answer, especially the last personal sharing, and thanked her courage in addressing it. He counseled that, in our joyful waiting for the Lord, we must not neglect others because salvation is for all.

Then he proceeded to the Response: To be able to participate in the journey together as one Church that sees the light of Christ as the sole guiding light. And posed the question "What makes it difficult to listen?" along with that capacity (without which we would be building deafening walls of indifference), he cited as necessary for the journey dialogue and decisions based on what Jesus would do. He justified this by our inherent tendency to have our personal property blessed (like house, car, images, and even handkerchiefs) because we want to Christianize them.

A subtle hint at our basic holy attribute, albeit hidden and rarely tapped. The cue for the next topic Commitment: What is my commitment towards truly making my journey towards the light of Christ a participatory journey? He was soliciting concrete actions to take to make our Advent journey more meaningful. One of the answers he read on the chatbox, because no one was still brave and coming forth, was teaching the poor and journeying with them. Which was a very good answer, if I were to be asked.

His next question was inevitable, "Why Mary?" (My inward reflex was "Why not!") Because, he supplied the answer, much to my expectation, in our period of joyful and hopeful waiting, we turn to her concrete experiences of not just being in communion with God, but she took part in the mission to fulfill and realize the kingdom of God and His plan of salvation for all (Luke 1:26-38). Because Mary knew very well how to listen to God (she was the first disciple of Christ, mind). Because of a pondering heart, she was obedient in dialogue (with Gabriel). Pregnant herself, she journeyed at great risk to visit cousin Elizabeth to help in her pregnancy. With these historical realities in mind, and within the pandemic, political conflict, poverty, and indifference, can there still be a reason for hope? His own answer was similar to my silent one, "Yes." Because in spite of our indifference, the Spirit continues to act in history and show His life-giving power. More than a few Churches have begun structural meetings and consultations with the people of God. Where they have worked through a synodal style, the sense of Church has flourished and the participation of all has given new impetus to ecclesial life. Synodality is the main road for the Church to take to renew her under the action of the Spirit, by listening to the Word, to initiate the process of listening, dialogue, and community discernment where all can participate and contribute. A truly synodal mentality is educated by the Spirit, and enters with courage and freedom of heart into a conversion process.

As a fitting cap to his discourse, he requested Sis Jackie to try again and play his "problematic" "Pasko ng Paglaya," which worked perfectly! Then he led his audience in prayer that we be basic agents of change and hope in a Church that is participatory to the mission.

Abraham de la Torre