"CARVING OUT THE ‘ASIAN FACE’ OF CHRIST": Challenge to a New Ecclesiastical Faculty*

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Introduction

The marker outside the Loyola House of Studies sets down 12 September 1965 as the date on which the splendid new buildings which the Philippine Jesuit Province had built on the Ateneo de Manila Campus on Loyola Heights were formally taken over by the Jesuit Scholasticate community. At that time, on 12 September, the whole Church used to celebrate the feast of the sweet name of Mary. That was 34 years ago, almost to the day.

I.

Today, on 10 September 1999, we set in place a new milestone in the history of LHS and the Loyola School of Theology (LST) which is its offshoot. Today we publicly promulgate, in the Philippine setting itself, the decree from the Holy See’s Congregation for Catholic Education, making LST a Pontifical Theological Faculty, with authorization to grant pontifical degrees in theology. Let me say simply that it is

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significant and historic moment, and we can exclaim with the apostle Peter, "It is good for us to be here!" and we don’t have to add, "We will build three tents," any more, because Fr. Joel Tabora has already constructed this superb Horacio de la Costa Center – a fitting tribute to this institution’s founder, then provincial of the Philippine Jesuits, and to Father Joel’s inspiration and industry also.

Maybe the most memorable part of today’s celebration is the “ecumenical event” – of the presence, here with us, of UST’s Dominican Rector Magnificus, Father Tamerlane Lana with other officers of our esteemed Pontifical University. We do not today hear the exchange of heated and combative words on the thorny question De Auxiliis of many centuries ago, but we hear instead the angels of heaven singing, "Quam bonum et quam jucundum, congregare fratres in unum!" What a joyous moment is it that these worthy brothers should meet here and join hands in friendship and communion, promising future collaboration in theological endeavors, for the good of the entire Church in our country, and for the glory of God. How happy I am that I am here to say, with St. Peter and with the sons of St. Dominic and St. Ignatius, with St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Robert Bellarmine, “It is good for us to be here!”

As Archbishop of Manila, I can only rejoice and give my warmest blessings. And I hope this is only the beginning of many fruitful meetings and maybe even joint ventures still to come, now that the third millennium is just around the corner.

Father Joel Tabora, now that you bear the even heavier burdens of a university presidency, I guess you can look back to your four years as head of LST with a sense of fulfillment at so much accomplished, in so short a time. Thank you for the mighty efforts which you see crowned today, and the sincerest congratulations of us all.

To LST’s new president, Father Victor Salanga, my blessings and good wishes. Under your guidance, may LST go forward in its outstanding service to the Church in the Philippines and in Asia, and importantly,
to the Holy See. Surely you will look upon the past 34 years as having shaped a tradition now entrusted to your hands, a distinguished tradition already, marked by faithful and generous service to the Holy Church, the people of God under its pastors.

Let me speak for the FABC, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, and for the CBCP, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines. Let me speak in my own name as Archbishop of Manila, and let me say how greatly appreciated this service has been in all the years since 1965, - a service that has been at the beck and call of our bishops, and our faithful, a loyal service of active and creative support of the local Church and the universal Church as well. For all this collaboration, Deo Gratias! and may it go on in the decades to come.

II.

These brief remarks do not allow me to speak at any length of what our expectations are, of Loyola School of Theology as a new pontifical faculty, bound to the Church by new bonds of dedication and loyalty. But, even if I do not profess to be a theologian of the academe, as a pastor I may be allowed to indicate to you a couple of points, as you – Fr. Salanga and your collaborators – draw up your agenda for the near future.

1. The first point I have already dwelt on: a constant and generous collaboration with our Philippine bishops, and our Asian bishops as well, a collaboration which has already been so richly productive in the past. Here, to mention only those who have gone ahead of us, let me name Fr. de la Costa himself, who could never say 'no' to anything we asked him to do for us. And that indefatigable 'Don Pedro,' Fr. Pedro Santiago de Achutegui, who became such a "work horse" for the CBCP and the FABC. - Let us speak of PCP-II of 1991 only, as one task so painstakingly undertaken. And before that, the Plenary Council of our archdiocese, held in 1979, which owed so
much to him. Today is a good day to pay tribute to his memory, even so inadequately. I think ‘Don Pedro’ is very much with us today in spirit, bubbling over with rejoicing, because he did so much also to bring today’s event to its realization.

2. My second point speaks to all theological schools in the Philippines, but in a more urgent and demanding way to graduate-level faculties like Sto. Tomas and LST.

It is your task to lead, in line with your own traditions of scholarship and creative labor, - to lead in the mighty endeavor of theological inculturation. The Synod of Asian Bishops of last year made this work a priority among other priorities. It asked for the development of a theology that is genuinely and unmistakably Filipino, - yet one which remains faithful, at depth and in its substance, - faithful to the great tradition of the Catholic communion. Allow me to cite an important figure of that synod, who said: “The effort to be a Church with an authentic ‘Asian face’ in explaining its doctrinal teaching, in its theological reflection, in its artistic expression, in its liturgical action and the like, is really only working together with what the spirit of Jesus is doing at this moment in Asia, - creating an Asian way of being Catholic, carving out the ‘Asian face’ of Christ for this hour of history.” This demand was voiced repeatedly, almost as a mandatory refrain; it was one of the master themes of that historic Asian bishops’ assembly of 1998, - an imperative of imperatives.

From what I can gather, this task calls for courage and creativity, for persevering labor, for mastery of language of image, story and symbol, and it sets up a daunting challenge for Filipino theologians of this generation, and even generations after them. In liturgical music the response has begun splendidly already, and here we can name Fr.
Eduardo Hontiveros and Fr. Manoling Francisco, and not a few others. I add also, the Jesuit Music Ministry. In theology, I am told, we still await the ‘great breakthrough,’ eagerly and expectantly. Let me say, “Let it come!”

Let me use this happy occasion to urge the faculties of UST and LST to address this challenge with all the light and fire they have in their souls, as part of their contribution to “the new evangelization” now that the Third Millennium opens. As someone has jokingly asked, “Is Mike Velarde’s theology the best we can do?”

3. One last request I make: May I ask you, Fr. Salanga, in time, to inaugurate an LST chair for Marian Studies, to focus specially on deepening Filipino understanding of the Church’s teaching on Mary, and a fuller exploration of our Lady’s role in Philippine life and history? I will myself make sure that a suitable fund will soon get it established, and I would be happy if in some small way my own name be associated with it, as a humble tribute to the Mother of our Lord, to whom I commend in a special way this faculty of theology.

Conclusion

Within sighting distance, on a good day, we may see the hills of Antipolo, that pilgrimage town where the Spanish Jesuits built the beloved shrine to Nuestra Senora de la Paz y Buen Viaje. I end by invoking her presence and her blessing on Loyola School of Theology.

May her blessing bring peace, for, as the motto of Pope Pius XII said, Opus Justitiae Pax; “Peace is the Work of Justice,” and I know LST will continue to foster “the peace that brings justice” through its theological endeavours. This task has been an imperative for you, since your very beginnings; may it still be high on your agenda in years to come.
That of course involves the "preferential option for the poor." One of the most valuable legacies of Fr. Joel to LST was that he not only taught social justice advocacy, but that he lives it with passion. He has spent so much of his time, talent and energies for the poor, with the poor, in solidarity with the poor. I trust this will be a distinctive note for all of you, all of you, here at LST.

Lastly, may Mary's blessing be like a good wind in your sails, bringing forward your journey into the future. Buen Viaje! Good journeying, into the uncharted seas before us, with the Spirit of God with you always, and never far from the company of St. Peter's barque, relying always and with a stout heart on the promises of Christ the Lord of history, He who is forever the Way, the Truth, the Life.