

Ligaya 40th Anniversary Conference Summary and Exhortation

By Vic Gutierrez

I shall speak to you today as an old man of the community.

You see, an old man of the village can give a certain perspective to the experience of the past as the village faces the challenges of today and prepare for tomorrow. I have been asked to give my views as an old man of this community.

1. I will start by citing the vision shared by Zechariah which can be helpful for us as we pursue our mission today. He prophesied God's action in the rebuilding of Jerusalem in 520 BC.

"I will strengthen Judah, yes, and Israel too. I will re-establish them because I love them. . . They shall be like mighty warriors. . . Their children, too, shall see the mercies of the Lord and be glad. Their hearts shall rejoice in the Lord." (Zech. 10: 6, 7)

In our own time, God has started a renewal in the Catholic Church and we are involved in it. We also believe that God wants us to be mighty warriors in the spiritual sense. He wants us to cascade his call down to our children. For our children, too, will see God's action in us and be encouraged to do their part as they grow up. Even when some of them move on to pursue their own vocation and mission outside community, they shall continue to be God's agents for social change in their own diverse ways.

How did Zechariah describe the rebuilt city (or community)?

"Old men and women will again sit in the squares, each with a stick (or cane) in hand on account of their great age. The squares of the city will be filled with boys and girls playing. It that seems impossible in the eyes of those who have returned from exile, will it be impossible for me as well, says the Lord?" (Zech 8: 4 – 6)

We are seeing something similar happening in our community today. Just take a look at recent events. In the last few weeks, we dedicated our young children to the Lord just like we have been doing every year. In previous weeks our YA and the junior YA had their own activities. Our single men and women and our married couples continue to gather for their own activities and service meetings. Even the seniors of Ligaya have their own fun times and their own times of service.

2. When I see Belen Perreras hobbling with a cane coming to our community gatherings, I remember the Zechariah vision. We look at Belen with honor and respect. She has served the Lord well in her prime and she continues to inspire our younger men and women till today. I have heard many of them say that they came to know the Lord personally because Belen, who was their classroom teacher, cared enough to speak to them about accepting a personal friendship with Jesus. They have taken their place among us in the community, serving along with us in evangelization.

Did Belen mount a stage and deliver a moving message of salvation? No! She only spoke of Jesus tirelessly as she pursued her career as a theology teacher. She spoke of Jesus not as a distant God but as a personal friend. And the young folks listened and believed.

We also remember that in, the past, we had Rene Lagdameo tirelessly speaking to his clients about the Lord as he went about selling life insurance. And Eli Concepcion doing the same thing as he served his real estate clients. But Rene had passed away. And Eli is sidelined due to illness. Yet many of our seniors are still doing it.

Now the greater brunt of evangelization in Ligaya is carried by the younger generation. Today we hear of younger folks like Rene Perez doing the same thing through his insurance sales office. Rene is in Ligaya because his parents brought him and his siblings here when they were much younger. Rene stayed and found a good woman to marry in the Ligaya and today they are raising their children in our community in the ways of the Lord. Rene and other younger brothers and sisters are continuing our evangelization mission as they go about doing their work.

I hear some of our Ligaya parents, proudly speaking of how their kids are doing evangelization and mission through the CYA and the Young Adults. Even the COJ that Marion Cruz founded years ago has grown and has become not just a school for young people but a venue for evangelizing the schoolchildren and their parents.

The evangelized are turning around and becoming the evangelizers as exhorted by Evangelii Nuntiandi. This is what we do in the Ligaya. Vic and Mary Pilapil did their part in the earlier days. Now that they have passed on to the other life, their son, Cecil Pilapil, is carrying on. Cecil and his wife, Marichu, are happy to see their son, JC, getting immersed in the ways of life and service in community. I am proud to see Ligaya families sharing the joy of the Lord down the generational lines.

3. What is Evangelii Nuntiandi? It is the apostolic exhortation of Pope Paul VI on evangelization in the modern world. Through this document, he is exhorting all Christians to rise up to our duty and spread the gospel of Christ.

Why do I consider the E.N. as very significant for us? E. N. was issued in 1975, the same year that God called Ligaya ng Panginoon into being. Our foundational prophecy is clear – God is calling us to bring his joy and presence into the world. During the same year, Pope Paul VI received the Catholic charismatic leaders from all over the world at St. Peter’s Basilica and there they heard a resounding prophecy, part of which states:

"Because I love you, I want to show you what I am doing in the world today. I want to prepare you for what is to come. Days of darkness are coming on the world, days of tribulation...Buildings that are now standing will not be standing. Supports that are there for my people now will not be there. I want you to be prepared, my people, to know only me and to cleave to me and to have me in a way deeper than ever before. I will lead you into the desert...I will strip you of everything that you are depending on now, so you depend just on me. A time of darkness is coming on the world, but a time of glory is coming for my church, a time of glory is coming for my people. I will pour out on you all the gifts of my Spirit. I will prepare you for spiritual combat; I will prepare you for a time of evangelism that the world has never seen...And

when you have nothing but me, you will have everything: land, fields, homes, and brothers and sisters and love and joy and peace more than ever before. Be ready, my people, I want to prepare you..."

In the past 40 years since 1975, the world has seen great evangelization that was never seen before. And we, the Ligaya, have the privilege of being part of it. We proclaimed the word of God in campuses, in restaurants, in sports facilities, in homes, almost everywhere. God empowered us to build evangelistic outreaches such as the CFC, the BCBP, CYA, Lingkod, Familia, Tahanan, Women for Christ, and others. We were faithful to God's call. And God empowered us as he promised.

At mass, earlier today, Fr. Alex shared that he was a beneficiary of our one-to-one evangelization. He came to Ligaya as a young man, felt loved and encouraged through our way of life and then he moved on confidently to pursue his vocation in the priesthood. Yes, our type of evangelization and pastoral care is characterized by personal care – by one-to-one care. You are not just a face in the crowd. You are cared for as a particular person in a particular way just like Jesus would pick out someone from the crowd and address his need. Remember, personal evangelization is key in our mission.

4. What was Pope Paul VI concerned about? In the E.N. he expressed concern about the *"increase of unbelief in the modern world."* Pope Paul VI said, *"From the spiritual point of view, the modern world seems to be forever immersed in what a modern author has termed 'the drama of atheistic humanism.'"*

He further explained: *"New forms of atheism seem to flow from it: a man-centered atheism no longer abstract and metaphysical but pragmatic, systematic and militant. Hand in hand with the atheistic secularism, we are daily faced, under the most diverse forms, with a consumer society, the pursuit of pleasure set up as the supreme value, a desire for power and domination, and discrimination of every kind: the inhuman tendencies of this 'humanism'."*

He said it becomes more urgent and important to evangelize because of the increase of unbelief in the modern world as well as the growing indifference of ordinary Christians to the faith.

5. Today we heard Jake warn us of practical atheism which is the same danger that Pope Paul VI refers to in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. Who is Jake? In 1980, he came to Ligaya, a bright young man who was evangelized by Mike Joseph, Jr. in the campus. CYA had just started then. Jake had met Jesus and gave his life to him and he never turned back. Now after many years, we see him as Dr. Joaquin Yap, honored by the theological community all the way to the Vatican circle. What God has done to Jake is a clear indication that God is building up our resources for the evangelization and community-building mission he has handed on to us.

Jake made it easy for us to understand the dangers of practical atheism. He explained that in today's society God seems to be missing in people's lives and people don't seem to miss him at all. Jake said that the problems of practical atheism show up in the fact that God is practically ignored in the choices and decisions that we make in life. In our moral choices – decisions of right and wrong. In choices we make whether in career, in state of life and lifestyle. We live as though God has not said a word to us about how we are to live.

“Isn’t it over-spiritual to consult Jesus for every little decision we make in life?” Two of our young members asked me during the lunch break. I said, it depends. What is clear is that Jesus wants to get involved in our lives, not just in the major decisions we make. He is a personal friend. Nothing is too little a matter to discuss with him. But you cannot just rely on the little inner voice you hear in your heart in making a decision. You have to approach your decisions in a balanced way. With reason, weigh the pros and cons. God is a God of order and reason. He has given us wise and caring friends and elders whom we can consult before making any decision. Use all the helps normally available to you but never forget to be guided by the word of God.

People tend to be attractive to the things of this world, often unaware that they are being led away from God, as St. John warned:

“Do not love the world or anything that belongs to the world. If you love the world, you do not love the Father. Everything that belongs to the world – what the sinful self-desires, what people see and want, and everything in this world that people are so proud of – none of this comes from the Father; it all comes from the world. The world and everything in it that people desire is passing away; but he who does the will of God lives forever.” (1 John 2: 15 – 17)

I heard that there are ladies’ signature bags that are worth half a million pesos each. When you buy a bag like that, I suggest that you check if your tithe for a year is at least 10 times the cost of your bag. I’m just giving an advice not an order, he, he. I am not in active service anymore. I am already retired.

By the way, what we should watch out for is not just about over-indulgence in the acquisition of goods and services but also about how we use our time and about the goals that we seek in our personal lives which are not aligned with God’s will. For example, we should watch out how much time we spend with modern technological gadgets. Somebody said, *“Technology isn’t just a servant that can improve life, but a force that can take over and determine your lives.”*

6. Jake shared about the moral disorder he observed in Europe. I have lived for a while in the U.S. and I have observed much of the same things; things you do not notice by simply visiting for a little while. But I have come out of all these with hope in my heart. I know that in times of escalating evil, God’s grace abounds even more, according to St. Paul. In our time, God has caused a renewal to take place. He is building up renewal groups and communities to bring his message of hope, love and peace to the world. We are one of those communities.

I feel sad when I hear some of our sister communities in the U.S. say that it is so much harder to evangelize in the U.S. than in the Philippines and they don’t do as much evangelization anymore. I hasten to remind them that God chose to start the Catholic charismatic renewal in the United States and from there, the renewal spread worldwide without much effort. God values the role of the U.S. in his work in the modern world. Maybe they shouldn’t be discouraged that easily now. We, too, should not get discouraged even now that evangelization is getting harder than 40 years ago.

We are part of God’s answer to the escalating evil that is upon the world. It sounds too presumptuous but it is true and we need to accept it humbly. We are a small part of it. We are called to be a prophetic people, a servant community, and a bulwark against the tide of evil.

We must now ask ourselves: Are we now the prophetic people that the Lord created us to be? A servant community? A bulwark? To be a prophetic people, each one has to be a prophet. We will let our lives, values and relationship speak God's word to the world and to the wider church. That's what we mean by prophetic life. To be a servant community, all of us have to be servants. God's servants are called to bring his word to the world. To be a bulwark, each one of us must do his or her share of protecting and promoting the truth of the gospel. We are called to seek out the people who need help, and to enlist the people whom God can use together with us in stemming the tide of evil.

We must always make use of every opportunity to evangelize. When I had my heart surgery (angioplasty) two years ago, I told my young heart surgeon, *"You should join our community."* He asked me, *"Why?"* I replied, *"Because we need men like you who can do much good for society. We have a mission as a Christian community."*

At a wake a few weeks ago, I met Secretary Petilla and his wife. He is the secretary of the Department of Energy in the cabinet of President Aquino. Our sister, Lora Narciso, who is their friend, said, *"I have been asking them to join us in Ligaya."* I explained to the secretary and his wife what Lora meant and why I think they should join us in Ligaya. He said, *"Maybe when I am no longer as busy as I am now."* He and his wife seemed interested. I think Rogie and Binggay should follow them up.

Whether in a wake, on the hospital bed, in the marketplace, or anywhere else, we should seize the opportunity to issue the Lord's invitation. But I am old now and not as mobile as before. I expect our younger brothers and sisters to carry on.

7. Admittedly, we are still a work in progress. God's work of formation continues in each of us. And Jake warns us that, if we are not careful, we, in Ligaya, may be living like practical atheists, too, unawares. Making decisions and choices in life based only on our own personal needs and personal goals. Forgetting to seek God's will in the proper use of our time and money and resources. Ignoring objective moral standards when our personal interests are threatened.

Our community discipleship program and our pastoral care system serve as God's protection for us. But we can be protected from these challenges only to the extent that we are willing to be protected and to the extent that we are willing to live concretely what we learn in our formation courses.

Earlier during the panel discussion, the need for regular prayer time was discussed. Yes, we must not neglect our prayer time. It is what keeps us connected with God. If you love one another, you should remind and encourage each other about the importance of maintaining a regular prayer life.

We need to listen with eagerness to our pastoral leaders and be open to our brothers and sisters about our lives. Openness to loving advice from them is one protection God is giving us in community. We should also be open to fraternal correction - another protection against sin and backsliding. Fraternal correction is one concrete way of expressing love for one another as brothers and sisters. Pope Benedict observed that fraternal correction is no longer practiced in the Church today. He suggests that we bring it back. I must add that fraternal correction is a Christian duty.

You cannot allow your brother or sister to be a jerk or fall into sin or be a coward – afraid to do what is right or to speak the truth when there is possibility of conflict. Cowards don't go to heaven.

My brother coordinators, you have a duty to show the example to the brethren. Do not be afraid to receive correction. Do not neglect to give correction to one another. If we fail in this duty, we may see the weakening of community leadership and of the brothers and sisters under our pastoral care.

Is our propensity to avoid giving and receiving correction a cultural trait among us, Filipinos? I thought so until I observed our friends in other places like the United States. They too are not that eager to give and receive correction. It seems to be a human weakness transculturally. But we accept it and practice it in community as part of our Christian way of life.

It takes humility and courage to appreciate fraternal correction. Humility and courage were the two key traits I took special note of when I was training my coordinator trainees.

(Share here about my experience in receiving correction from my teen-age son years ago which led me to see my fault in an earlier argument with my daughter. It led me to ask forgiveness from my daughter. It was not easy for me but I grew from that experience. It was also a practical experience in how to grow in loving relationship. An encounter like this should be experienced broadly in the wider family, the Ligaya.)

Again, we ask: Why are we in a discipleship formation program? First of all, it is because God loves us. But it also because God wants to use us in the work of evangelization – calling people back to God's plan. Our formation program helps us to take on the mind and heart of God so that we can be his effective servants and prophets.

8. Our lives are meant to be road signs that can help people find the Lord. This is one way of saying that we are called to live prophetic lives – lives that point to the presence and will of God. While we are concerned about conversion of the hearts and minds of people, we must also be open to opportunities to do something to make life of society better, more just and less corrupt and enslaving.

Little did Rogie Singson know that the Lord would call him to not only to live a prophetic life but to literally build roads and bridges that can make people's lives better. I'd like to point out that what Rogie is doing is part of evangelization. The Synod of Bishops said so in its 1971 paper, Justice in the World.

“Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.”

In simpler language, when Rogie and other Christian brothers and sisters promote righteousness in government service and in the practice of their profession, what they do are an integral part of our evangelization mission.

His wife, Binggay, is a silent yet active partner in Rogie's work. We can imagine that she suffers through his pain and sacrifice. She shares his anxieties when threats and frustrations come. That she has allowed Rogie to take the risk and sacrifice is by itself an active participation in promoting the Gospel. I mention Binggay as an example of the many women in our community who serve the Lord generously by allowing and supporting their husbands to serve the Lord in whatever service their husbands are called to do.

I bow to you, all the holy wives of this community, for the support and sacrifice you make in allowing your husbands to accept the Lord's call to serve him in Church and society. Without your cooperation and encouragement, it would be difficult for us to heed the Lord's call to serve.

9. Today, I see young men and women stepping up to serve and continue the mission of our community. I'm happy to see that we are giving much attention to evangelization of the youth. But Raoul Roncal expressed his concerns about the formation of young minds.

Who is Raoul? Raoul was a much younger man when he joined Ligaya in 1985. He gave me the impression of a carefree man with a ready smile for everybody. Now he is a well-regarded theology professor at Ateneo. He is still the likeable person that we all know but when he speaks today, people listen. His coming to maturity and wisdom is another evidence of what the Lord is doing to raise our resources for the mission.

What is Raoul's concern? As a theology professor and leader in youth ministry, he has seen how young bright minds even in the better universities can be captives to the influences of practical atheism. This should really be a concern of the rest of society because these young folks can someday become the leaders of our businesses, society and government. What they can become will determine the kind of future leadership in our country. Note that Raoul is concerned not only for our own community kids but for the young minds in our larger society. Rightly so, because that is part of our evangelistic posture.

Parents have a very important role in the care and upbringing of our youth. I can appreciate the dedication of Noel and Dulce Echague in raising up their son, Jordan, to be the committed young Christian that he is today. I can imagine that it wasn't easy for them when you hear Jordan's sharing about his ungodly days of the past. I am pleased to hear him speak with confidence about his faith in today's panel discussion. I am sure that he will make a fine leader because he has seen the wild ways of the world. You can't easily fool him if he becomes your pastoral leader.

The root of the problem, though, lies not in the campus alone. Eric Metaxas, a Christian author said:

"It's something most Christian parents worry about. You send your kids off to college and when they come back, you find they've lost their faith. The prospect of this happening is why many parents nudge their kids towards Christian colleges, or at least with a strong Christian presence on campus. But in many ways, the damage has been done long before our children set foot on campus. That's the message from a recent article in the Atlantic Monthly."

"Are we living lives that show our children that we actually believe what we say we believe?"

10. What if all the families in our country decide to raise up their kids starting from childhood on strong moral foundation and make character-building one of their main goals? Maybe we can expect a new, stronger nation where justice and peace will reign. There will be concern for the poor and underprivileged. There will be fewer crimes. We will need much less policemen and there will be fewer jails and courts of law to maintain. And our neighboring nations will ask us, "How did you do it?"

That is too ideal, I know, but we can at least start with small steps.

Charles Colson shared that when he was receiving an award at Buckingham Palace in 1993, Prince Philip asked him, "Mr. Colson, what can we do about juvenile crime here in England?" He replied, "Send more young British children to Sunday school."

The Prince thought he was joking. But Charles continued, "Professor Christie Davies at the University of Reading conducted a study that showed when Sunday school attendance was highest in England, crime was lowest. Conversely, when Sunday school attendance declined, the crime rate increased. So send young boys to Sunday school so they can be taught the basics of Christian morality."

11. Brothers and sisters, we have in community our CFP and YA programs to support our Ligaya parents in raising up their children. But are you aware that we have a school, COJ, that is a partner in mission of Ligaya, and is dedicated to the moral as well as academic formation of young children's minds. It is not just a school, it is like a community. And it evangelizes not just the children but also their parents, some of whom have joined us already as underway members of Ligaya. Ellen Jamias, one of our panelists, is one of those parents evangelized through the COJ.

COJ graduates, by the way, are admired by other schools for their academic excellence and outstanding character.

Can you imagine what good we can do if we in the Ligaya help COJ multiply itself into many more schools in Metro Manila? Can you imagine what these children will be like when they grow up? Can you imagine if some of us whom God has made rich will get together and help set up more COJ schools within the next 10 years? If we do that, can you imagine what we will see among us when we celebrate our 50th Ligaya anniversary? COJ is not owned by anybody. It is a non-stock, non-profit foundation. COJ operates primarily to pursue a part of Ligaya mission. It operates not for business purpose but for mission.

But first, we must help COJ now to keep our dedicated and fine teachers. Yes, there's always a danger that we could lose them. Why? Do you know that our COJ teachers are earning way below standard, earning much less than the teachers in public elementary schools? Do we want to offer quality education and good moral upbringing? There's a price to pay for quality, a price to pay for mission.

12. God has been tirelessly speaking to us about building up our homes and families for him, and making available our resources. I just know when some of you are intently listening to God. I

have spoken to some of you in the past and I am inspired by how easily you agree to use your money for God's purpose. You have been listening to God before I even talked to you. I have spoken to some young men and women years ago and they have given their lives to serve God and have continued to do so for many years now. They, too, listen to God for their life direction. We have been seeing a crop of younger leaders and servants trained in the ways of the Lord now running the community and its mission.

One of them has been raised by God to be our next Senior Head Coordinator for the coming 3 -6 years. Andy Juan. Who is Andy? He is a man who reluctantly came into the community on the holy insistence of his parents. But he obeyed and joined Ligaya. After years of formation in Ligaya, he was very hesitant to be a coordinator trainee because he wasn't sure he would have enough time left between family and work. But God has shown him that God supplies what he needs to serve both family and community. He has been serving as a coordinator for many years and now he has willingly accepted his new cross

I have not congratulated Andy up to now. When I read about what Pope Francis said to his young friend whom he installed as a cardinal, I understood why I was hesitant to congratulate him. Pope Francis said endearingly to the newly-installed cardinal, "This is not a promotion nor an honor. This is a call to serve." Andy, take up your cross. God has not made a mistake in choosing you to be our next SHC.

13. In 40 years the Lord has been building up our community for a purpose. He has blessed each one of us in different ways. Let's use whatever blessings we have received for God's purpose. God has assigned different roles to each one of us and given us blessings to fulfill our roles. Jake, his wisdom. Andy, his leadership. Raoul, his love for the youth. Some, their wealth. Others, their talents. We all have a part to play.

But as Pope Francis warned, Christians run the risk of becoming museums, of having so much but not knowing what to do with them. Our resources cannot stay with us. They have to be used for God's purpose. Our best resources are our people, our leaders and our various gifts.

I'm not sure if we have given to God all that he expects us to give him yet. Why do I say that? It is because we continue to hear prophetic words urging us to give our all to him. For example, John Yocum gave a prophecy at the ICM in Sto Domingo in 2008:

"I tell you that I cannot do with you what I intend to do with you until you have given me more than you have yet given.

I tell you that I cannot accomplish what I intend to accomplish through you, until you abandon more than you have yet abandoned.

I do not rebuke you, nor do I upbraid you for your offering, but it is a fact that I cannot accomplish through the Sword of the Spirit what I intend to accomplish, I cannot do through you what I fully purpose to do through you, until you have given to me willingly more than you have yet given.

And so, when I come to require it at your hands, prepare yourselves to offer it to me willingly. Train yourselves to give yourselves to me fully, so that when I require it of you, I might find from you a free and willing sacrifice, says the Lord.”

We expect our OLC and COC to give us a clear agenda for the next ten years leading to our 50th year in response to God’s word. The next ten years can be very interesting times.

I hope we can get involved in some social advocacies and in the care of the poor. Ligaya is not for Ligaya alone. We are called to be brothers and sisters not only to one another in the Ligaya but to the wider Church and society. We are called to love the poor and the less privileged in society. It is for that reason that the Lord has enriched us and empowered us.

I may not be around to see those great things that God will do in Ligaya and through Ligaya. I am happy though that in the past 40 years, we have learned to live the compassionate love that Jesus came to teach us. A life of compassion is nothing less than entering into each other’s lives. It means being brothers and sisters to one another, sharing each other’s joys and pains, tears and triumphs. This is the core of our covenant – to live a life of compassion.

I believe that as we learn to live our life of compassion to the full – sharing lives and love with one another – more and more people will be served. Ligaya will grow stronger beyond our expectation but only if we are faithful to our evangelization mission and to our community way of life.

We can’t let just a few of us do the evangelization. We have to bring God’s joy and hope to everyone we meet. And our evangelization has to result in building up the bulwark – enlisting strong men and women for the task that God has handed on to us.

We are not ending our conference today. Next October, we will resume this conference. We will discuss how our Filipino culture combined with our Christian community culture is building us up to be effective servants and prophets that the Lord wants us to be. Let us look forward to that conference.

Let us thank God for the past 40 years and accept in faith all that the Lord will bring to us in the next 10 years. I thank God for all of you, my brothers and sisters. God bless you all.

VBG/2-15-15