Pope's message to Filipinos

Pope Francis left the Philippines on Monday after a historic five-day visit marked by many firsts such as a gathering of six to seven million people for a Mass celebrated no less by the Pontiff which is now considered the biggest papal event in history. The Pope also celebrated Masses in Tacloban City and at the Rizal Park under the rain and stormy weather which never dampened all his spirit and the millions of devotees wearing raincoats wanting to get a peep of him and hear his homilies and messages to the people.

One of the most important messages of the Pontiff was made in the halls of Malacanang under the very noses of President Aquino and other government leaders, some of whom are under watch for corruption and graft. This message was a call to stop corruption and for leaders to be honest and full of integrity, pointing out that corruption is a plague which, for one, gnaws the resources which could have been provided to the poor. “Reforming the social structures which perpetuate poverty and the exclusion of the poor first requires a conversion of mind and heart,” the Roman Catholic Church leader said. “I hope that this prophetic summons will challenge everyone, at all levels of society, to reject every form of corruption which diverts resources from the poor, and to make concerted efforts to ensure the inclusion of every man and woman and child in the life of the community,” he added.

Another important message was addressed to the youth who he rallied to make God the center of their lives and the families who he wants to practice responsible parenthood, stressing that good Catholics need not be “like rabbits.” The Pope was referring to the ability and tendency of rabbits to multiply rather uncontrollably.

All throughout the public appearances of the Pope, the Filipinos showed to him their unquestionable faith which impressed and delighted the Pontiff himself and the world who viewed the ceremonies on television. Now that the Pope is back at the Vatican, the people should now immerse themselves on his timely messages and practice his teachings. Otherwise, there is no point bringing him back in January 2016 in Cebu or the 500th year celebration of the introduction to the Philippines of the Catholic faith by Spain in the coming years.

Nous sommes Charlie Hebdo

If you write for a living you are Charlie Hebdo.

Charlie Hebdo (“hebdo” is French for “weekly”) is the Paris-based newspaper whose offices were attacked January 7 by avowed Muslim terrorists with ties to the Al Qaeda. Twelve were shot dead along with the editor, a guest editor, three cartoonists, two columnists and a police officer. More were killed in subsequent standoffs in the hunt for the killers.

The massacre brings chills to anyone who chooses to “report” an event or comment on an issue: You never know whom you will offend and how that individual might react.

No matter how objective or fair a recitation of events, someone will always find cause for slight.

But most people who decide to become journalists on whichever medium often are oblivious to the risks of the profession. For love of the truth, with passion to express disdain or admiration, journalists indulge their freedom to be frank.

Especially the French. Remember: They beheaded their monarch.

Charlie Hebdo did not seem to care much whom it insulted. The publication is unashamedly anti-religion, but since 911 it has focused on Muslims.

Masked commandoes armed with high-powered weapons chose the perfect time last week to execute their prey — at an editorial meeting.

I can imagine that Wednesday a typical day at the office on No. 10 Rue Nicolas Appert in the hip Marais district — the Castro of Paris — deadline looming, stories brewing, graphs and quotes dancing in their heads as they hunkered down to business.

Perhaps there were a few chuckles — the paper has been known to satire politicians and political issues — even if the matter at hand was racism, but the clock was ticking and with every second the printer’s fee rises and with it everyone’s blood pressure.

Coffee certainly fueled the frenzy as the news budget was weighted.

I can see Stephane Charbonnier, 47, weighing pitches for the baner and Jean “Cau” Cabut, 76, doodling what would be another shocker like his 2006 caricature of the Prophet Mohammed that authorities say triggered a firestorm of reaction from around the world, including the White House, which clarified its objection as that to the responsibility of the deed but not the actual deed.

Three years ago, the paper’s officers were fired following publication of parodies of Mohammed captioned “100 lashes if you don’t die of laughter.”

Hilarious to some, blasphemy to others.

That 2011 attack destroyed Charlie Hebdo’s computer system but not their resolve to mockery of extremists.

“I am not afraid of retaliation. I’d rather die standing than live on my knees,” Charbonnier responded, for sure with that infamous Gallic shrug. He did allow a bodyguard to shadow him, though.

And so in its next issue, the paper sported a French artist smooching with a bearded man in Muslim attire with the headline “L’amour plus fort que la haine” or “Love is stronger than hate.”

Clearly the editors had underestimated the power of hate.

On the day of the massacre, former editor Philippe Val vowed: “We will never stop laughing.”

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Bigger disaster

O
ne week after the news was out about the massacre of 44 Philippine National Police-Special Action Force (PNP-SAF) in Mamasapano, Maguindanao, Filipinos are still highly emotional and mourning what they believe as needless death of the men at the hands of Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) rebels and their allies.

Even as investigations are ongoing, the people are still at a loss as to what happened out there as officials, including President Aquino and suspended PNP chief Alan Purisima, who purportedly had prior knowledge and may have authorized the operations, are vague or silent about their roles thus fueling speculations on the botched operations. Congress and other leaders also had an angry outburst, triggering the suspension of hearings on the Bangsamoro bill and withdrawal of authorship or sponsorship of the measure.

Reports had it that some 392 PNP-SAF officers and men went to Mamasapano to arrest two most-wanted terrorists: Marwan and Usman. The wanted men -- one of whom had a $5-million prize on his head and the other $3 million -- were said responsible for deaths of hundreds of peoples in series of bomb attacks in the Philippines and Malaysia and have eluded authorities for many years. While the PNP-SAF chief claimed, after the fact, that they had exercises and proper planning for the raid, many can't still believe his story as 44 policemen littered the area while some 300 men were nearby not even attempting to help and rescue their comrades who were in the deep fire with the enemies. Then, the MILF had the guilt to justify the massacre, claiming that the police forces invaded their territory without informing them in keeping allegedly on their peace talks agreement with the government.

Several investigations have initiated to find out the truth about the massacre and who were responsible for the carnage. Aside from the PNP and the Armed Forces, the Senate and the House of Representatives have mounted their own separate probes. Then the Commission on Human Rights, after days of silence, started its own investigation. And not to be outdone, President Aquino ordered the Department of Justice and the National Bureau of Investigation to mount its own probe, a move which many feared could muddle the probe and may result in cover-up. Perhaps, as leader of the country, the Chief Executive could help just harmonize all agencies so that only one probe would do the job. Already, the Mamasapano massacre would go down the history as one of the most disastrous failures in the history of the police service. It would be a bigger disaster if nothing would come out substantive of the supposed independent investigations. Let us all help give justice to the slain heroes in Mamasapano.
Dreaming for Olympic gold

As Filipino athletes have won at least nine silver and bronze medals in the Olympics, mostly in boxing, the Philippines continues to nurture the elusive dream of capturing the gold in the summer games. Our Olympic medalists so far are Teodoro Ydelfonso, Simeon Toribio, Jose Villanueva, Miguel White, Leopoldo Serantes, Roel Velasco, who bagged the bronze and Anthony Villanueva and Mansuelo Velasco, two great boxers, who won the silvers.

If the record of many American athletes with Filipino blood is the gauge, the Filipinos could actually snatch a gold medal or two. In the San Francisco Bay Area alone, take the case of Victoria Manalo Taylor Draves, whose father Teofilo Manalo was a musician from Tarlac, who snatched just not one but two golds in the London Olympics of 1948 in springboard and platform diving events. Then there is the favorite daughter of Vallejo, California, Natalie Aguillon Coughlin, the winningest American woman Olympic medalist with four golds, four silvers and four bronze in swimming. Coughlin’s mother is a full-blooded Filipino from Cavite.

The trouble with Philippine sports is that politics is eating it up. Thus, the country has no massive sports program to boot and athletes are at the mercy of politicians and officials who offer but crumbs to the youth with big potentials in the world of sports. The country’s quest for supremacy in basketball is one good example. While the Philippines dominated Asian basketball for some time, the cagers are now at the mercy of taller and stronger Chinese, Iranians and others from Asia alone. The just concluded FIBA Asia tourney in China, for instance, showed the gallantry of an ill-prepared team which nevertheless ended up as silver medalist with a chance to join the Rio Olympics next year nil. But gallantry and support of fans and some helpful benefactors will not do the magic alone. When will the Filipinos learn? Shall we be content with the tag as the country with so many medals in the Olympics but without a gold? What would it take for the Philippine leaders to wake up and instill the pride in Filipinos once more, especially in athletics and sports? Wake up everyone!
Adverse effects of El Nino

El Nino. For centuries, the name is nice to Filipinos and to many in the Asia Pacific region who share the same belief with the people of the Philippines – because it refers to the Child Jesus. Yet, El Nino has become a dreaded weather phenomenon with its long dry spell and heavy rains causing massive floods, destruction of crops and livestock due to drought, among others.

The first destructive El Nino was recorded in 1950 when weather men started recording the phenomenon. The El Nino of 1982-83 was the second largest on record. Then, this was followed by the devastating El Nino of 1997-98 which brought massive amounts of rainfall amidst drought and dry spell in other parts of the globe killing many people, destroying infrastructures and crops, among others.

Early this year, scientists have monitored another looming El Nino phenomenon which could be the strongest and the worst in years. Already, billions of pesos worth of agricultural crops have been destroyed in Isabela province and other provinces in the Philippines and this could increase as the phenomenon worsens by October and linger up to December and early 2016.

This prompted the United Nations, the World Food Program (WFP), the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) based in Los Banos, Laguna in the Philippines, the US National Weather Service’s Climate Prediction Center, the Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical, and Astronomical Services Administration (PAGASA) and similar agencies in Asia and the Pacific region to air warnings about the adverse effects of the El Nino phenomenon in the region. More than destruction, the phenomenon which could last for 20 months would have a telling effect on the supply of food, especially rice which is the major staple in the Philippines and Asia.

Although there is no perfect way to predict the weather phenomenon, its pattern of effects has been well studied and, therefore, what would happen next could be predicted. In the Philippines, experts have warned authorities early enough of the phenomenon, but apparently the preparations of the Department of Agriculture and other government agencies have been found wanting as a Philippine senator lambasted the government for slow spending on appropriations for measures such as water impounding dams. Malacanang apparently has felt the pressure of the oncoming possible disaster prompting President Aquino to convene his Cabinet this week and directed that an action plan be readied immediately. Hopefully, this step taken by the Palace would help mitigate the effects of El Nino in the coming months. The farmers, fishermen and the ordinary people will be expecting this action plan.

Friends gather for Ninoy

At the age of 6, Juan Miguel attended his first political rally. The boy arose early and happily slipped on a shirt that matched the ones on his father and mother – in yellow like the flesh of his favorite mango. His front outlined with a bespectacled face, in deep contemplation. He did not know what to expect but looked forward to being with his parents and a bunch of strangers to honor someone important at a famous park by the bay. That was in Manila on August 21, 1984, one year after Philippine Senator Benigno Aquino Jr. was shot while exiting from a plane upon arrival from forced exile and left lifelines for hours on the airport tarmac.

To this day, his assassin has not been officially identified. Back then and now, however, who ordered the execution of the most outspoken critic of the repressive Marcos regime was and is beyond doubt. The murder sparked Filipino patriotism and gifted the world with People Power, the peaceful revolution that ousted the dictatorship and restored democratic processes in the Philippines.

If the Philippines is free from tyranny today, Filipinos have Aquino to thank. That is why 32 years later, relatives, allies and admirers of “Ninoy,” in the modern Philippine hero is known throughout his beloved homeland, continue to congregate around this time to recall his sacrifice.

In San Francisco, Catholic Mass typically precedes a brief program followed by a community reception reunifying Bay Area residents Lupita Aquino Kashiba, her husband Ken Kashiba, their families and their friends. The events have taken place in recent years at the Philippine consulate general on Sutter Street.

“Every year since Ninoy died, we have gathered to commemorate his death anniversary,” Aquino Kashiba told Rappler. “It has become friends getting together to catch up with each other and to remember Ninoy.”

The martyred senator’s younger sister named the earliest anniversary commemorations “Friends of Friends of Ninoy” to symbolize the breadth of appreciation for his brother’s heroism. Each annual event welcomes everyone wishing to recall the darkest days of the dictatorship, when Aquino was in involuntary exile in the Boston area, inspired co-thots to trust that together they could vanquish the despots.

Many of those attending this week’s assemblages had learned of Aquino from school or their elders, having been too young to have been conscious of political currents in their country.

“This year, we will meet on August 20th, which is August 21 in the Philippines and hear from Consul General Harry Benitez, his reaction as a young man when he heard Ninoy was shot and the status of Philippine-China relations,” Aquino Kashiba said. “He is the country’s point man in the ongoing maritime dispute. If Ninoy were alive today, what would he tell the diplomat?”

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THE VIOLENT SUPPRESSION OF THE INDIGENOUS LUMAD PEOPLE
By Angelo Lopez for the November 11, 2015 Philippines Today

SOUTH SAN FRANCISCO, Calif. - Family, friends and colleagues said a reluctant goodbye November 9 to a longtime certified nurse assistant who died of a heart attack while on her annual pilgrimage in the Philippines.

Rebecita “Lisa” Ramos Paulino, 51, was devoted to her family as she was dedicated to caring for patients at the A&C Convalescent Hospital in Millbrae, California, her employer for 15 years.

Since 2006, however, Paulino took a break from everything to travel to Nueva Ecija in the Philippines to honor her late father Marcelino Ramos Sr. on his birthday and All Saints’ Day. Each year she traveled to the remote town, lighting candles and laying roses on her father’s tomb shortly after arriving in Cabanatuan City Oct. 23.

Days earlier Typhoon Lando had ravaged the Central Plains of Luzon, inundating ricefields and flooding homes including the Ramoses residence. The “balikbayan” did not think twice before joining relatives in mopping up the muddy remnants of the storm.

After the cleanup, relatives on Oct. 30 decided to take their U.S. visitor on an excursion to a resort in Laguna, a couple of hours south of the disaster area.

The group’s guest was going over her clothes when she felt tired and asked to sit in the van. Moments later she collapsed and was rushed to a hospital, where she was pronounced dead on arrival.

Though she was known to be taking medication for hypertension, her untimely death stunned and saddened her family, siblings and co-workers, who knew her as “Cultur” and “Lisa,” the youngest of three brothers and six sons born to Marcelino Sr. and Luissia Ramos.

“Her most typical Lisa, ready and eager to help out any time,” QA engineer Ronaldo Paulino said of his wife after the Rosary led by his father Deacon Tony Paulino on the eve of the funeral.

By happenstance Deacon Tony and his wife Rose Paulino were in Manila to mark the 40th day of passing of another relative. They sped to Laguna to help prepare for their daughter-in-law’s repatriation to California as their son, who had stayed behind because of work in San Mateo, California, broke the news to their children who are in college in Colorado Springs and Las Vegas.

“We will cherish memories of her kindness and humility and her devotion to family and work,” Lisa’s beloved husband told Philippine News. “She hardly said no when called upon to take a shift, evenings or weekends.”

Rebecita “Lisa” Miranda Ramos Paulino was born July 23, 1964 in Cabanatuan, Nueva Ecija. She was laid to rest Nov. 9 at Holy Cross Memorial Park following Mass at St. Andrew Church in Daly City. Twenty-one years earlier, she had walked down the same aisle to exchange wedding vows with Ronald Paulino.

She is survived by her husband and her children Aran and Valerie Paulino, and Michael Custodio, and her grandson CJ Custodio; her mother Luisaria Ramos and her siblings Rey, Romy, Rick, Romy, Riza, Boyet, McCoy, and Omar and their families, and countless friends, co-workers and current and former patients.

Lisa Ramos Paulino was devoted to her family and work.

Yolanda victims’ sufferings

Super typhoon Yolanda (international name: Haiyan) with sustained winds at 285 km/h (180 mph) was the most powerful typhoon recorded in recent history. It was also the deadliest as it killed the death over 6,300 people (and the number is still rising as more than 3,000 were still missing) or more people than the tragic Twin Towers 9/11 incident in New York, and those of the Pearl Harbor attack by the Japanese. Typhoon Yolanda also destroyed houses, infrastructure and crops worth billions of pesos and rendering thousands of people homeless. The massive typhoon affected millions in nine regions, 44 provinces, and more than 12,000 barangays. Nine in 10 of those affected were from Western, Central, and Eastern Visayas (Regions 6, 7, and 8).

Immediately, in the aftermath of the typhoon, the United States brought in aid and other countries like Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, Israel, Japan and many others followed sending troops, medical equipment, food and relief items and billions of dollars in aid. But two years hence, thousands, if not the majority of the typhoon victims are still in sorry state, with aid not reaching them and are still homeless without the promised temporary or permanent homes. In Tacloban City alone, only 500 housing units have been built but without clean water. Then the Commission on Audit made public with its findings that millions of pesos of aid received from foreign countries have been impounded in banks and not being touched to help the victims. Even President Aquino’s appointed rehabilitation czar, former Senator Panfilo Lacson admitted that there was lack of focus, some government agencies are not doing their jobs, and so the “nightmare” of Super Typhoon Yolanda “continues to haunt us.” Lacson lamented that despite President Aquino’s commitment to speed up rehabilitation and recovery in Yolanda-devastated areas, some of the programs were not being implemented.

“If not for the non-government sector and the bilateral and multilateral agencies from foreign countries which responded and assisted beyond anyone’s expectations, I cannot imagine how things shall have been accomplished as we see it two years after Yolanda. The nightmare of Nov. 8, 2013 continues to haunt us,” he said.

Former Budget Secretary and UP professor Benjamin Diokno said of the situation “Epic incompetence and callousness. The failure to address the needs of disaster victims after two years is unacceptable.” To Vice President Jejomar Binay, who led the commemoration of the second anniversary of the typhoon (Presiding Aquino ignored the invitation to be there as he attended a wedding of a millionaire’s son, that of Mega-world’s Andrew Tan), said it was a crime to allow the victims to continue to suffer and walk from wanton disregard from government due to many factors like the ugly head of politics. Even the United Nations earlier aired its concern on the resettlement and rehabilitation efforts.

Two years hence, many mistakes have been exposed. It is clear for one that many people still need assistance and that rehabilitation and resettlement have been too slow and, therefore, must be sped up. At the same time, the government, and also the private groups which are recipients as conduits of cash donations, must be transparent with the work that they are doing and the handling of funds. Super typhoon Yolanda also showed the importance of preparedness. The country being an archipelago there are many areas which are exceptionally vulnerable to storm surges and efforts such as planting of mangroves in the shores and moving communities to higher levels must be institutionalized to protect these regions and the people. At the rate things are going, no time should be wasted for blaming each other for the mistakes that typhoon Yolanda has brought to light. Everybody – government and the private sector - must come to their senses, make good plans, orchestrate the work well and act immediately before we lose entirely the country’s credibility from the international donor community.