

Welcoming Remarks

Jovito R. Salonga
President of the Philippines Senate

On behalf of the evangelical community in the Philippines, and on my own behalf, I am honored to greet and welcome the delegates to the Lausanne II International Congress on World Evangelization.

I understand there are more than four thousand people from 173 countries attending this ten-day gathering in this historic city. To each and everyone of you I say in Filipino, our national language: “*Maligayang pagdating. Tinatanggap namin kayo ng buong lugod at kastyahan.*” (“A happy welcome. We receive you with great joy and pleasure.”)

It is our earnest prayer that the God of all nations, the Lord of all history, will bless your deliberations so from here we may go forth into all the corners of the world with a new spirit and a new resolve—namely, to proclaim the Good News not only from the church pulpit but in public and private offices; in the factories and the farms; in the classrooms or in dark prison cells; in the refugee camps of the hungry and the homeless; in all places where fear, anxiety, suffering, and despair plague humanity; and there, point to our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, and say, “There is the Light of the World.”

The Philippines is a country where your prayers and discussions will sound familiar. As far back as I can remember, our people have been described as “the only Christian nation in Asia.” We say that with pride since 90 percent of our people, mostly Catholics, profess the Christian faith. But sometimes I wonder whether that is a compliment or a cause for continuing reproach.

During the twenty-year rule which ended in February 1988, we were also described as the most corrupt nation in Asia. Corruption and Christianity are simply incompatible.

Even now graft and corruption seem to dominate the news reports in this city of twenty-five competing daily newspapers—a record seldom equalled in any place in the world. (New York has only three or four dailies, and all of Sweden has only two morning and two evening newspapers.) But let me add that our people are not easily fooled. During the days of dictatorship, we believed only three things printed in the newspapers: the classified ads, the death notices, and the comics!

The gospel teaches us to accord great respect to the sacredness of human life. But unfortunately, this is a country torn by insurgency. Assassinations, ambushes, and massacres are daily occurrences. It is tragic that church pastors and workers are not spared by the extreme right or the extreme left. On May 1, 1989, paramilitary forces identified with the government reportedly killed a woman pastor and her husband. And on June 25, 1989, an entire congregation of almost forty members, including the lay pastor and his children, were brutally massacred during Sunday school by Communist-

led rebels in Davao del Sur. These two tragedies occurring in the southern island of Mindanao show what it means to live the gospel in a Christian country rent asunder by insurgency.

The roots of that insurgency may be traced in part to our massive, grinding poverty and the host of injustices poverty breeds. We have a population of almost sixty million in a country blessed with abundant natural resources. There is the heart of paradox. Italy was once described by a U.S. ambassador as “a poor country full of rich people.” The Philippines, by way of contrast, is a rich country full of poor people. Around 60 to 70 percent of our people live below the poverty level. Eighty-five percent of our school children suffer from malnutrition, and according to the research of one Jesuit priest, only eighty-one families—apart from the big corporations—control the wealth of this nation. We are burdened by a huge foreign debt of almost thirty billion dollars. Servicing our total debt consumes more than 40 percent of our national budget. This is the context in which the Good News is being preached today in the Philippines. In metro Manila alone, where this Congress is being held, roughly 30 percent of the inhabitants are slum dwellers; that is to say, squatters in their own country, without any home they can call their own.

That is why Jesus Christ’s inaugural sermon in a synagogue in Nazareth, quoting from the prophet Isaiah, contains a wealth of meaning:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor (Luke 4:18).

I understand this Congress will deal with the problems of working among the urban poor. That is good news to us. One of the things we learned during our years of struggle is that we achieve spirituality not only when we are in the privacy of our individual worship, but also when we are out in the busy streets or in the crowded marketplace among the oppressed and the poor, identifying ourselves with the lowliest of them and struggling with them for a free, open society where—we pray and hope—the weak shall be strong and the strong shall be just.

I believe the time is past when we could build our own separate, individual stairway to heaven, away from the sufferings of our people. In the tragedy of our Philippine condition, God’s kingdom may also be found where we struggle together with those who yearn to work for truth, justice, freedom, and a better life for all.

Welcome again, and may your ten-day gathering exert a profound influence in the lives of people all over the world. Best wishes and, as we say here, “*Mabuhay! Salamat po.*”