

Bishop Arturo Bastes**TO PROCLAIM THE WORD*****Jophen Bauí***

Bishop Arturo Bastes is the Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Sorsogon since six years ago. Formerly, he was Bishop of the Diocese of Romblon for five years, a total of eleven years. As Chairman of the Biblical Apostolate, representing the Catholic Bishop Conference of the Philippines, he had been elected as moderator of the executive committee of the Catholic Biblical Federation. This Federation concerns itself with proclaiming the Word of God, especially among the Catholics. The Bishop has a licentiate in Sacred Theology, and a Licentiate in Sacred Scriptures. This qualifies him to teach in any Catholic Seminary all over the world. Bishop Bastes is chairman of the Board of the Philippine Bible Society.

Once while he was stationed in Surigao, Bishop Bastes had to cross to the next island to officiate a wedding. He was thankful that at that very moment when he needed transportation, a fellow priest was also crossing to that same island to bring building materials for his chapel. Bishop Bastes was happy that this priest accommodated him in his boat. The Bishop boarded the vehicle. The sky was clear and everything was in place. The priests were on their way to their day's tasks.

But when the boat was in the middle of the sea, a storm suddenly formed in the sky, and huge waves began tossing the vessel. The boat nearly capsized.

That storm could have been the most major of threats to a life-long fulfilment of a call and a mission – for Bishop Bastes – to proclaim the Word of God.

When a child of about eight, this future Bishop asked his Papa, “What is the religion of the Chinese?”

“They are Buddhists, son,” His father told him.

“Do they know Jesus?”

“No son, they don't.”

“But how will they be saved if they don't know Jesus?” the little boy was really worried.

“Even at the time, I pitied the Chinese. I was told that in order to go to heaven, I must know Jesus. So those who don’t know them, what will happen to them?” Bishop Bastes asked.

Since then and until now, the Bishop has stopped worrying. Instead, he’s been living a full life of fulfilling a call to do his part in order that people will be “saved.”

“I believe that to be a Christian is to first become a listener of God’s Word. Since the beginning when I studied in Christ the King Mission seminary, owned by the society of the divine word religious, our vision was unique because we believed that we are missionaries to promote the Word of God. That is why we are one of the most active in the Catholic Church in biblical pastoral ministry. It is the characteristic of that congregation.

“Even before I became a priest, I already loved the Bible. I had a thirty day retreat where you contemplate the life of our Lord Jesus Christ, the mysteries of his life as found in the holy gospel. The mysteries of the Lord’s life really touched me. I said that if I did anything in this world, I had to do what our Lord did. So when I became a novice of the Society of the Divine Word when I entered the officiate, it was very clear to me that my profession would be somehow to proclaim the Word of God.”

Just a year after 1997 after Bishop Bastes became a Bishop, the CBCP elected him as the Chairperson of the Episcopal Biblical apostolate of the CBCP – that is, he was made in charge of promoting the Bible, the Word of God, to all the Catholics of the whole country of the Philippines. “I studied the Bible scientifically, I taught it in Seminary, and maybe that is why when I became a bishop they made me Chairman of the Biblical apostolate.”

His election and direction had been divinely engineered. Early in his office as Bishop, he founded the Second Catholic Regional Biblical Center of the Philippines in Davao City, Mindanao. He called it “Paul the Sixth Biblical Center,” in honor of the Apostle Paul who wrote “one of the best encyclicals about evangelization.”

When he did become Bishop, many bishops already knew him because, “I taught in the seminary, I was promoting the Bible apostolate, and I was selling Bibles.” Beginning in 1985 he became a friend of the Philippine Bible Society because he bought Bibles from them to supply his Biblical Center with Bibles. “At the time, PBS is the only one publishing Bibles for everybody.”

The Catholic trade in Davao was owned by the SVD society, “and I am an SVD.” The Bishop acted as store manager and marketing person on top of his teaching at the Regional Major Seminary of St Xavier in Mindanao.

“I was ordering thousands of Bibles at the time and selling them at the cheapest possible price, only fifteen pesos, so I can motivate people to buy them. Then I gave them a basic Bible seminar so that they will not only receive and own a Bible, but also, they will understand and know how to use it. “

As a priest, Bishop Bastes underlines that Biblical Pastoral Ministry focuses on the Word of God. “Catholics used to focus so much on the sacraments, like mass, confirmation, and others but they seemed to forget listening to God’s Word. In fact that was already the focus given to us in the Second Vatican Council.”

The second Vatican council had long issued a “dogmatic constitution of divine revelation.” This constitution “somehow released the Catholics from being imprisoned regarding the Word of God,” said the Bishop.

Now for the first time, the church has a special document with a chapter that says, ‘easy access to the sacred scriptures must be given to all the Christian faithful.’

“This was truly momentous, for the Word of God was really released. Its riches are to be rediscovered by all the catholic faithful.”

The Bishop feels privileged to be right at the center of this “rediscovery.” He calls it “the end of the babylonian captivity of the Bible among Catholics.”