Columns
Spirituality



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"For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope" (Jeremiah 29:11).

"*Thank you God! I am alive*!" This was the first thing I joyfully uttered the moment I woke up early on the first day of April. The soft cool breeze gently blowing through my window and the radiant dawn breaking was enough to make me bounce out of my bed to begin a new day. From a distance, I could already hear the sacred call to prayer of our Muslim brethren echoing throughout our neighborhood. And so, after a quick shower, I headed out for a brisk 20-minute walk to the Santo Niño Cathedral for the 6 a.m. Mass.

Time flies so fast — and as I began the second quarter of this year 2022, I simply felt gratitude for the precious, priceless gift of life bestowed upon me by our Creator. I felt this sense of gratitude even more keenly upon learning the heartbreaking news of the death of a young priest who never saw the light of day today, but passed away at 3 a.m. while half of humanity was engulfed in deep sleep. He was only 42 years old.

He succumbed to sarcoma, a rare kind of cancer of connective tissue — cells that connect or support other kinds of tissue in the body. His tumor spread so fast in his bones, muscles, tendons and the blood vessels of his arms and legs that he deteriorated quickly, and he died in less than a month. I had only a few encounters with him in the not-so-distant past, but his ready smile, lighthearted countenance and zest for life and for the mission shall remain in my heart, and I am thankful for having met him.

At 57, I sometimes wonder if I deserve to be saved at all. A number of friends, relatives, acquaintances and even family have not been spared by the COVID-19 pandemic that caught the world by surprise early in 2020. We continue to grieve for the loss of our loved ones whom we will no longer see. In a sudden twist of fate, they have left this earthly life all too soon. I realized that now more than ever, death no longer knows age. Death comes like a thief in the night, and only then do we fully grasp its meaning when someone dear and near to us suddenly passes away.

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Humanity seems not to have learned from history's horrible lessons of war and violence. Or have we? Blood remains grimly etched in our history books, never to be forgotten. Time and again, we kill one another, all because of hate, greed, envy, pride and prejudice. It is so alarming to see the tragedies of the ongoing war in Ukraine, where thousands of lives and properties have been lost, and we are still counting.

The entire human race and the whole of creation is in danger of being totally eradicated with a mere push of a button, for efforts of peace negotiations to stop the war seemingly remain to be a far-fetched reality. And so, as we find ourselves at the threshold of life and death, we continue to hold on to our fervent prayers that a glimmer of hope will shine through the gloomy clouds of violence and despair.

I remember the horrors of World War II as sadly recounted by my grandfather Lolo Teofisto, in his personal journals from 1942 to 1945. He wrote them so vividly that I could almost imagine myself right beside him and my grandmother, taking refuge in the basement of their house in Manila, terrified by the loud and deafening noise of warplanes in a seemingly endless exchange of ballistic air fighting between the American and Japanese military. Thank God they survived! But the 1945 Battle in Manila caused so much havoc in the country, resulting in the death of more than 100,000 innocent civilians and leaving the capital in total ruins. The monthlong battle was the scene of the worst urban fighting in the Pacific, and with Warsaw and Berlin, Manila was considered one of the most devastated cities during the entire war.

April happens to be Earth Month. The weeks leading up to Earth Day on April 22 provide a time to realize that new life and hope can resurrect from the ashes of war and violence. It occurs right after the Holy Week celebration, and Easter sets the tone for Christians to resuscitate what has died — for as it is now, our planet continues to be threatened with extinction by our selfish pursuit of material idols. In his encyclical *Laudato Sí',* Pope Francis reminds us that we are all connected. Creation is God's great gift to us. Without it, humanity will not survive.

Earth Day 2022's theme. "Invest in Our Planet," is a wake-up call for all of us to come together to take action to preserve and protect our health, our families, our livelihood — as one human family. Our future is full of hope if we invest all our time, talent and treasure to make a green future a reality. We are enjoined to act

courageously, innovate broadly and implement equitably as one global community to save our planet that is now on the brink of total destruction if we do nothing about it. We can no longer remain indifferent to this urgent call because climate change is real and global warming is changing the face of the Earth.

At this juncture of our history, we need an ecological conversion and a personal/collective transformation of hearts, if we are to restore nature’s beauty, bounty and biodiversity, for time is running short. Our partnership for the Earth is a vital gift our present generation can pass on to the next generation. We need to invest in a healthy planet for the sake of the children of today and their children of tomorrow.

Finally, as I walked back home from morning Mass, an inner sense of tranquility dwelled in me. New life awaits despite the sad and disturbing news of death and war raging in our world today. Hope springs eternal and I smile at the heavens knowing that we are not alone in the journey. The Risen Lord Jesus is with us in every step of the way; I remember his words: "Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live' " (John 11:25)

Eternal rest grant upon the soul of Sacred Heart Fr. Joseph Butlig, O Lord! And may perpetual life shine upon him! Amen.