

Headline: Duterte, the Pope—and the planet

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I GOT the sense that the earth made an extra revolution or two last month; so much history was being made.

In the Philippines, the middle of October was the time for prospective candidates to file their certificates of candidacy for the 2016 elections. Despite the carnival-like atmosphere and the unprecedented number of applications for president, the filing period brought clarity to the country's favorite pastime of politics.

Of the many words that filled the airwaves and the column inches and the digital pages, those of Davao City Mayor Rodrigo Duterte were the most awaited and the most analyzed. He had to decline the presidential draft that has been following him for the last several months not only once (at the start of the week) but twice (in the last hours of the filing period). On Monday, Oct. 12, he read a statement that repeated his many attempts to decline the draft, and then added: "We have a problem in the family, and in the order of things, you do what is closest to your heart." (This was what he told the Inquirer last August.)

On Friday, Oct. 16, when his supporters counted down the hours and various observers wondered whether there would be a dramatic twist to what by then was being called the Duterte-serye (the Duterte soap opera), he posted a message on Facebook. "I want to retire. I am tired. Give the presidency to the one who wants it. I don't."

But many of his supporters refused to take him at his word, and even misconstrued his daughter Sara's shaving of her head as a sign in favor of a presidential run. We see what we want to see.

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For three weeks in October, the second phase of the Synod on the family was in session at the Vatican—and an ancient institution unused to the open discussion of contentious issues found itself rocked by controversy from the start. I found the interventions of the German bishops most instructive, especially the way their positions came together when they "did" theology rather than engage in debate.

But, as in the first phase of the Synod last year, it was Pope Francis who placed the unprecedented back-and-forth in the right perspective, and again he did it in his homily (based on the day's readings, as is always the case with his homilies) during the closing Mass, on Oct. 25.

Two paragraphs, in particular, struck home. (I am using the Vatican Radio English translation.) The first is a reaffirmation of the Francis papacy's defining thrust. The second puts the Synod controversy in the right light.

"There is an interesting detail. Jesus asks his disciples to go and call Bartimaeus. They address the blind man with two expressions, which only Jesus uses in the rest of the Gospel. First they say to him: 'Take heart!' which literally means 'have faith, strong courage!' Indeed, only an encounter with Jesus gives a person the strength to face the most difficult situations. The second expression is 'Rise!' as Jesus said to so many of the sick, whom he took by the hand and healed. His disciples do

nothing other than repeat Jesus' encouraging and liberating words, leading him directly to Jesus, without lecturing him. Jesus' disciples are called to this, even today, especially today: to bring people into contact with the compassionate Mercy that saves. When humanity's cry, like Bartimaeus', becomes stronger still, there is no other response than to make Jesus' words our own and, above all, imitate his heart. Moments of suffering and conflict are for God occasions of mercy. Today is a time of mercy!

"There are, however, some temptations for those who follow Jesus. The Gospel shows at least two of them. None of the disciples stopped, as Jesus did. They continued to walk, going on as if nothing were happening. If Bartimaeus was blind, they were deaf: his problem was not their problem. This can be a danger for us: in the face of constant problems, it is better to move on, instead of letting ourselves be bothered. In this way, just like the disciples, we are with Jesus but we do not think like him. We are in his group, but our hearts are not open. We lose wonder, gratitude and enthusiasm, and risk becoming habitually unmoved by grace. We are able to speak about him and work for him, but we live far from his heart, which is reaching out to those who are wounded. This is the temptation: a 'spirituality of illusion': we can walk through the deserts of humanity without seeing what is really there; instead, we see what we want to see. We are capable of developing views of the world, but we do not accept what the Lord places before our eyes. A faith that does not know how to root itself in the life of people remains arid and, rather than oases, creates other deserts."

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In the third week of October, climate change negotiators met in Bonn again to prepare for the last phase leading to the historic conference in Paris, where a new climate treaty is expected to be concluded. The meeting was soaked in frustration; the 20-page draft prepared by the co-chairs was roundly criticized for leaving out many of the concerns of developing economies like the Philippines, and after a discouraging week the draft text of the proposed new universal agreement and its implementing decisions had ballooned to over 50 pages.

"We now have a Party-owned text that is balanced and complete," UN climate chief Christiana Figueres said. "The challenge for governments is to bring it down to a much more concise and coherent form for adoption in Paris."

That, unfortunately, was supposed to be the task of the last Bonn meeting. But we see what we want to see. Let's hope Paris turns out to be a real oasis, not a mirage.

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