

Headline: 'Great to be President'

Byline: Nikko Dizon

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President Benigno Aquino III returned home from Europe on Saturday afternoon, saying it is "wonderful" to be the leader of a people who have done their country proud.

Mr. Aquino returned from a weeklong trip to Paris, Rome and the Vatican.

READ: Aquino back from Paris talks, meeting with Pope

In five days, Mr. Aquino joined other world leaders in calling for a climate agreement for Earth's very survival, met with European Union investors, tackled bilateral and global issues with fellow heads of state, and met with the much-revered Pope Francis to discuss faith and humanity.

In all of his engagements, Mr. Aquino was well received by his counterparts and he heard positive feedback anew about Filipinos in foreign lands.

"The Philippines is very much different now, and the world looks at us differently now. It's true: you are the ones who made the change and you are the ones who would continue this. What I can say is, it is truly wonderful to be President of a people who continue to show what they can do, continue to have faith and continue to receive the admiration of the whole world," Mr. Aquino said in his arrival speech.

Philippine Airlines Flight

PR 100 carrying the President home from Rome, Italy, touched down at Ninoy Aquino International Airport at around 1 p.m.

From the airport, Mr. Aquino proceeded to the nearby Villamor Air Base for the turnover and blessing of two newly acquired FA-50PH fighter jets from South Korea.

Good news

"It is wonderful to come home to our country, especially because I have some good news for you again," the President said.

In Italy, Mr. Aquino said, he truly felt the "admiration" of Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi and President Sergio Mattarella for the Filipinos' contributions to Italy.

"This is what prompted them to give our countrymen preferential status in choosing [guest workers] in Italy. The Philippines and Italy signed a labor agreement to implement this," he said.

The President also spoke about his meeting with the Filipino community in Rome, where he told them of "the transformation we are experiencing now and emphasized to them the need to take care of this so that we don't have to return to the dark past we came from."

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Mr. Aquino said the Italian leaders also expressed their support for the Philippine government's peace process in Mindanao as well as its stand on peacefully resolving the Philippines territorial dispute with China in the South China Sea.

Paris climate talks

In Paris, his first stop for his three-nation European trip, Mr. Aquino said that at the United Nations climate talks, the Philippines made its position heard on the need to have a "broad and justiciable solution to the issue of climate change."

The President said Germany and France joined the Philippine-led call through the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF) to limit global warming to lower than 1.5 degrees Celsius from pre-Industrial Revolution levels and not the 2 degrees Celsius campaigned for by most nations.

He also said that from the original 20 member countries, the CVF would soon become a 23-member bloc, making the voices of climate-vulnerable countries louder.

"Part of this is our call for help for countries like ours in ... climate financing and technology to allow us to do more to contribute to taking steps regarding climate change. With more countries that are bigger and industrialized taking our position, the more that gatherings like COP21 are becoming more effective and relevant," he said, referring to the Paris climate conference.

EU investors

Mr. Aquino also shared details of his meetings with leading business companies in Paris.

READ: Aquino gushes over PH-made, high-tech French toothbrush

The President said the pharmaceutical company Sanofi Pasteur wanted to distribute in the Philippines a vaccine for all four dengue strains for a reasonable price and at the soonest possible time.

He said CRH France had invested P60 billion in Lafarge-Holcim in the Philippines, where its head also said that the company wanted to invest some P2.3 billion more in the country, which it had chosen as its investment hub in Southeast Asia.

Jacobi Carbons Group AB, a Swedish company that invests in countryside development, wants to expand its operations in processing coconut shells into ingredient for activated carbon filters, Mr. Aquino said.

Jacobi Carbons opened a P517-million plant in Cagayan de Oro in September. Its planned expansion will create 2,850 jobs for Filipinos.

Manufactured in PH

"The primary beneficiaries of this investment are our local coconut farmers who will help in supplying coconut shells to the company," Mr. Aquino said.

He said Airbus had expressed interest in enhancing the Philippines' aerospace industry. Some components of the Airbus 350 are manufactured in the Philippines.

President Aquino also visited the offices of Usine IO, a workshop dedicated to hardware technologies and start-ups, where he learned that a high-tech toothbrush that has a smartphone app that informs the user if he brushed his teeth properly is manufactured in the Philippines.

'Lightness' of being with Pope

Clearly, the highlight of the President's trip was his meeting with Pope Francis at the Vatican on Friday, the last day of his European trip.

Before he flew back home, Mr. Aquino was upbeat after his meeting with the Pontiff. He said he felt light and blessed.

"We offered to him a national prayer for peace, justice and extensive development," he said.

"Let me also share with you: there is a different lightness brought by meeting with Pope Francis. He is the leader of the Catholic Church but really, he is truly humble," Mr. Aquino said.

The President reiterated the Pontiff's request for the Philippines to pray for him.

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"I told him that the Filipinos love him so much and even Filipinos who are not Catholic pray for him," he said.

The President said he and Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin discussed the peace process in Mindanao and the poverty reduction programs of the government.

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Another papal visit

"And even if the Pope has just visited us last January, I still extended to him the invitation to return and witness the deep faith of the Filipino," Mr. Aquino said.

Before he left the Vatican, he said he joined the inauguration of the mosaic image of Our Lady of Peñafrancia at the Vatican Gardens.

He said it was a great honor for the Philippines to have its own national image of the Virgin Mary, as only select countries have such images at the Vatican Gardens.

"It is an honor to be given the chance to share with other Catholics in the world the [Marian] image that gives our nation strength, hope and inspiration," Mr. Aquino said. TVJ

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