

The Church's Effort in the Philippines

Embodying Ecological conversion

One great challenge of our time is undoubtedly the ecological one. The new generations are strongly urging a radical change that will allow us to continue inhabiting this planet for centuries to come. Mgr. Gerardo Alminaza is bishop in the diocese of San Carlo in the Philippines. The Philippines is among the nations in the world which are most vulnerable to natural disasters. Located along the Pacific Ring of Fire, its more than 7 thousand islands are regularly impacted by floods, typhoons, landslides, earthquakes, volcanoes and droughts, with an average of typhoons 26 times a year! Msgr. Gerardo recounts how evangelization passes through ecological commitment.

Mgr. Gerardo Alminaza

The Philippines has committed to meeting the Paris Agreement's goal of limiting global warming to 1.5°C by 2030. It is ten years since the super typhoon Haiyan devastated our country. It was an unprecedented tragedy that prompted Pope Francis to visit us in 2015, a few months before publishing *Laudato si'*.

I was installed as bishop in one of the four dioceses on the island of Negros only eight days after that tragedy. One challenge that I had to face from the beginning was to accept the Holy Father's appeal to drastically reduce carbon dioxide emissions and other highly polluting fossil fuels. For the diocese, this meant concretely opposing a 300 MW coal-fired power plant being proposed by a large company that donates substantial sums of money to many of our ecclesial projects.

There were already 9 solar plants, 8 biomass plants and 10 hydroelectric plants in our territory, making a total of 27 renewable energy projects. Paradoxically, however, while producing 97 percent renewable energy on our island - making us the renewable energy center of our country - upwards of 73% of our electricity was instead supplied to us from dirty fossil fuels on nearby islands!

We four bishops of Negros, supported by our people and especially the youth, together with our network of communities affected by fossil fuel, different civic movements, faith groups, and various other local and national organizations, managed to convince the company to withdraw its coal plant project. But the company then changed its plan again and decided to use liquefied natural gas (LNG), which is yet another fossil fuel. Again, we expressed our strong collective opposition and the company eventually withdrew its application last year.

We thank God that our island remains fossil-free to this day, and hope to fulfill our dream of being an island which will be 100 percent powered by renewable energy. Following the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines' urgent appeal for ecological conversion,

most dioceses, including ours, instituted policies of not accepting donations from deforesting, coal, and fossil gas extraction industries, as well as from quarries and devastating mines. The Church intends to completely divest its assets from financial institutions and companies that invest in these environmentally harmful activities by 2025.

We also affirm our commitment not to support activities that promote destructive mining activities, and urge all institutions holding Church financial resources to abandon extractive industries as soon as possible. We have decided to engage in the implementation of actions more in line with the message of *Laudato si'*.

We are also fighting to protect what is known as the "Amazon of the oceans," or the Green Island Passage, or VIP, in the Philippines. It is a marine corridor in the heart of the Coral Triangle, with more than 300 species of coral, underwater rock canyons and reef formations. It is home to 60 percent of all known shore fish species in the world, and makes VIP the most biodiverse marine habitat in the world. A paradise like the VIP is, without a doubt, a reflective picture of God's love and grace. It must remind us of our duty to protect and prosper.

We hope, too, that World Youth Day 2023 will continue to remind us of the importance of safeguarding God's creation for all young people, as they inherit the world we will leave behind.