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Philippines March 21, 2017

Filipinos on Homonhon Island in the central Philippines marked the anniversary this week of the arrival of the first Spanish expedition, which precluded the birth of Christianity in the country 496 years ago.

"It was a blessing in disguise," said Father Giovanni Bandoy, parish priest of the island. "Whatever the reason of the expedition, we have to be grateful that they brought the faith to us," he said.

On March 16, 1521, explorer Ferdinand Magellan landed on Homonhon after sailing from the Marianas Islands. He and his men stayed on the island for eight days to rest and replenish supplies.

Through an interpreter, Magellan told the natives that the expedition was sent by the king of Spain to

"spread the Catholic faith" and convert people to the "true religion."

Some historical accounts indicated that on March 19, the Spaniards celebrated Mass and planted a cross near the shores of Homonhon.

The Philippine government, however, declared another island, Limasawa, as the site of the first Mass on March 31.

Father Bandoy said the celebration of Magellan's arrival in the Philippines is "an invitation for us to assess our faith." The priest said Filipinos must take a "look back" and "see if we are moving forward or backward."

"Where are we now?" said the priest. "We cannot claim that we are progressing in our faith if reality shows the opposite," he said.

"How can we say we are Catholics if we favor the death penalty and if we don't value the dignity of life," added Father Bandoy.

Father Jano Baquilod of Borongan Diocese said the "irony" of how Filipinos practice their faith is evident on Homonhon, which hosts four mining companies.

"Let us not forget that our faith teaches us that we should care for all creation," said Father Baquilod, adding that it is "not so Catholic that we abuse and overuse the things that nature offers."

Father Baquilod said the celebration of Magellan's arrival is a reminder that "we are just visitors on this earth" and being Catholics "means taking care of our common home."

Mark Saludes - UCAN - Homonhon Island