Two Filipino men supported by local Catholics were sent home as missionaries in January

by Tanya Connor

"For us it's a dream come true," Brother Alex Castro said after a commissioning Mass at Assumption College, Jan. 15, as he and Brother Clemente Boleche beamed at the thought of returning to their native land the next day. "They've been thinking about this for a long time and now it's becoming a reality." "They" are the Augustinians of the Assumption, commonly called Assumptionists, who founded and sponsor Assumption College. What they have been thinking about – and working on – is founding their first community in the Philippines. Since 2000, young Filipino men discerning an Assumptionist vocation have come here to live with the Assumptionists and take classes at Assumption College. Those who stayed did their novitiate at St. Anne and St. Patrick Parish in Sturbridge, which the Assumptionists staff. Brother Castro, Brother Boleche and Brother Carlos Melocoton professed their first vows as Assumptionists there. They introduced parishioners to their faith and culture through Filipino festivals and the installation of a statue of San Lorenzo Ruiz – their country's first saint – in St. Anne Shrine's votive chapel. The Assumptionists turned to San Lorenzo as the patron for their efforts to establish a community in the Philippines.

After studying at St. John Seminary in Brighton and living with the Assumptionist community nearby, Brothers Castro and Boleche were "missioned" to the Philippines" along with Father Bernard Holzer, a French priest who had been serving in Rome, and Father Gilles Blouin, a Canadian previously stationed in Jerusalem. Father Jean-Marie Chuvi Adubango, of the Democratic Republic of Congo, who had been a pastor in Tanzania, joined them in the Philippines. Before commissioning the men, Father Richard Lamoureux, superior general, told them to search constantly, be ready to move in response to the call, ask God's guidance and be witnesses. I was moved by the liturgy," Father Blouin, who arrived in Worcester last December, said afterwards. "I could feel the tears coming behind my lens. You've been part of something and now it's time to go." "We would like to thank all the people who have helped us, for this dream to become a reality," Brother Boleche said, explaining that the support reaches beyond them. "It's an opportunity for us to bring the Assumption to the Philippines and then work as laborers in the vineyard of the Lord to our fellow Filipinos," said Brother Castro.

That labor is to involve education, since that is what Filipino leaders – from the president to the bishops to the seminary rectors – told the Assumptionists they need, according to Father John Franck. While serving as provincial Assumptionists superior of the Assumptionists' North American province, Father Franck helped prepare for the foundation in the Philippines. The Philippines is part of the North American province which also includes Assumptionist houses in

Canada and Mexico and four in the United States, Assumptionists, for whom education is a primary ministry, are being welcomed in the Philippines because the Religious of the Assumption, one of their sister congregations, are considered the top educators there, Father Franck said.

A deeply religious country, the Philippines probably does not need another religious congregation, Father Lamoureux said. But the Assumptionists went because of the need for education in a society which faces deep political and economic challenges, he said. They wanted to help the Religious of the Assumption and strengthen their own presence in Asia, hoping to someday be called to China, he said. The mission to Asia was one of three priorities the Assumptionists decided upon at their chapter meeting in Rome last year, according to Father Dennis Gallagher, regional superior for the United States, who has helped with the Filipino mission. The Assumptionists have a foundation in South Korea and are preparing for one in Vietnam, with 20-some Vietnamese studying in France, he said. “Once we decided to found, we knew that each of us had to do a lot of things when we went” to the Philippines, Father Franck said. “I interviewed 20 candidates every time I went.” Vocations are honored there, he said. Several men hope to start living with the new community in June, said Father Holzer, superior and director of formation. Filipino men learned more about the congregation through the vocation retreats conducted by American Assumptionists and the Filipinos who made visits home during their stay in the United States, Father Gallagher said. The congregation now plans to keep candidates and postulants in the Philippines, bring them to the United States for the end of their postulancy and their novitiate, then send them back home for further formation, he said.

In the first “chronicle” of the new foundation, Father Holzer wrote about waking up to an aging rooster and millions of motorized tricycles, shopping for a computer room air conditioner and getting used to texting – “a national sport which allows us to communicate with each other and with the people we meet, by cell phone, at low price.” They also visited the museum of the Augustinians, the first religious order to arrive with Spanish conquerors, and met with them and the Religious of the Assumption and Little Sisters of the Assumption, another congregation in the Assumption family, he wrote. They rented a house in Quezon City, close to a Jesuit University where the Assumptionist brothers are to continue their studies. On Feb. 2, the feast of the Presentation and of Consecrated Life, their home was officially blessed and inaugurated. Father Lamoureux helped them define their mission at their first local Chapter Feb. 6, then they held an open house Feb. 11. “Our purpose is to build an international, inter-Asian and Christ-centered Assumptionist community, sharing our charism with the Filipino people, attentive to their needs, especially those of the poor,” Father Holzer wrote. “We want to insist on vocation ministry for the future and the solid initial and continuing formation of our brothers, as our priorities at this time of founding. … Our apostolate will be defined gradually, by being attentive to the needs of the Filipino people and becoming more involved in their life."

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