

Return From the Other Side of the Globe, 2003

So read the tourist brochure that we received on our arrival in Manila. The next sentence went on to say: "In the heart of southeast Asia, stretching more than 1,840 kilometers, composed of 7,109 islands, the Philippines stands at the crossroads of the developed Western world and the Orient."

By way of proving the brochure right, Fr. Bernard Holzer, a general assistant, and I flew to this crossroads the same day, January 15, he from Rome via Thailand and I from Boston via Alaska and Taiwan. My own expectations had been raised from stories told by Filipino sister friends and recent brother Assumptionist visitors, by newly arrived Filipino candidates, and by lingering scenes from black and white World War II movies; but such images, however vivid, could ever, in any way, prepare one for the reality we experienced.

After his visit there last summer, Fr. Roger treated the readers of ANA to a written travelogue that described his own impressions in stunningly colorful and incomparable fashion with his unparalleled eye for detail.... from the jeepneys and the motorelas (forms of public transport) to the exotic array of fruits and local delicacies, from the clogged, polluted streets of Manila to its densely populated slums. From my own treasury of memories, I would like to focus on three.

First, there were the sisters themselves, the Religious of the Assumption, 150 strong, who first arrived in the Philippines in 1892 at the request of Maria Cristina, the Queen Regent of Spain, to open a superior normal school for women teachers in Manila. We were warmly received in their homes during our stay (which quickly and easily became our homes), visited a number of their

schools (they run about ten in all... from elementary schools to colleges), met many of their students, past and present, talked with their lay collaborators, and benefitted from their vast network of contacts. These are women of extraordinary faith, vision, and commitment. They have a clear mission, intentionally chosen and universally supported, that they pursue with passion and energy.... in Marie Eugenie's words, transforming society through education (a theme brought home to us by former president, Cory Aquino, during our extraordinary visit with her, "Fathers, if you want to do something for Filipino society, educate us. Education is the way out of poverty"). More than in any other country that I know, the sisters have reflected deeply and systematically on the meaning of an Assumption education and have found concrete and impressive ways to bring Marie Eugenie's vision to life. She is everywhere: in photos and paintings on the walls of classrooms, offices, corridors, and chapels; in her principles of education on the lips of teachers and administrators; in the prayers and songs recited by hundreds of their students; in her example embodied in the sisters and their lay collaborators.

Secondly, as I have mentioned, it is impossible not to see the spirit of the sisters alive in so many of their lay collaborators, whether Chit Manlapaz, the insightful and vocation-vigilant director of San Simon College in Pampanga, or Maita Magalong, the contagiously enthusiastic executive director of the Filipino AMA (Associate Missionaries of the Assumption), whether the self-directed administrative board that oversees their school in Passi with only part-time assistance from the sisters to Chinit Rufino, the deeply committed and industrious director of the Marie Eugenie Institute (MEI). To convey just a bit the influence that the sisters have had, let me say a word about Chinit Rufino, the director of the MEI. Although Bernard and I had come to the end of an exhausting, three-week, whirlwind visit, we wanted to learn more about the MEI; but, needless to say, we didn't have much gas left in the tank. Not to worry----- Chinit had enough energy to recharge hundreds of batteries. Not only did she explain the extraordinary and elaborate Assumption formation that the Institute provides to teachers and administrators of the sisters' schools; we also learned from her how the principles of an Assumption education are being adapted and incorporated into a comprehensive plan to reform the entire national educational system in the Philippines. How could we not have been caught up in her passion and charm!

Thirdly, and finally, there are the young men we met who have shown an interest in an Assumption vocation, almost all of whom have had some contact with the RAs, young men drawn to them, in their words, by what they experienced with the sisters: their vision, their

community life, the quality of their prayer, their openness, and their collaboration with the laity. During the three weeks that we were there, I had interviews (usually 1 ½ -2 hours each) with 18 individuals, almost all of whom impressed me with the depth of their reflection and discernment, with their broad experience, with their honesty, and with their spirit of adventure and self-sacrifice. We are talking of teachers (at every level: elementary schools through college), bankers, investment consultants, telecommunication and pharmaceutical salesmen, graduate students, and adult faith formators. In a word, men of quality and substance.

However busy our agenda, however fatiguing the pace, it was impossible to return without renewed energy and hope and profound gratitude to the sisters who welcomed us so generously. The spirit of Assumption is indeed alive at this crossroads of East and West, where our experience was “7,000 times beyond our expectations.”

Fr. John L. Franck, A.A., Provincial

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