Summary: The community is growing with the arrival of two Filipino brothers. Insertion and inculturation continue. The community lookingat its future: work with the poor, vocation ministry. Bayard explores possibilities of investing.

The arrival of two new Filipino brothers

Brother Ricky Montanez (35 years old) joined the community on August 12th, just in time for the Feast of the Assumption. After his novitiate in Chile, Bro. Ricky had spent five years in the US and he is just back from a six months training in Colombia. He will now continue his studies in theology in preparation for ordination. After a family visit in Bago, in the province of Negros Occidental, he spent some time in Iloilo where he had been an English teacher and student activities coordinator for eight years at Assumption-Iloilo, a school run by the Religious of the Assumption.

On September 9th, Brother Ed Molina (46 years old) also arrived, fresh from his novitiate in the US. He will soon start his studies in theology in Manila. Thus, the community is now composed of eleven members: seven religious and four candidates.

Insertion and Inculturation ***Official recognition of the Congregation in the Philippines***

On September 8th, the Congregation received its official recognition by the Government of the Philippines under its registration name: Augustinians of the Assumption Inc. This allows us to have a legal entity, to deal financially and to own property. At the end of September in fact, we will be able to buy in our own name a house and property. Soon after, workers will start the renovation of the house in order to adapt it to our needs; we should be ready to move into our new house after four months.

More Tagalog classes and other formation

Fr. Chuvi has been continuing his Tagalog classes full time. He is now in an immersion program in an orphanage at Laguna (South of Manila) called “Poblete Charity Home”, run by a Congolese priest of the Missionaries Servants of the Poor. He has daily practice of Tagalog with the children and has even started to say Mass in Tagalog. Frs. Bernard and Gilles are not doing so well (the age is there!) and even had to cut off precious hours of class in order to follow a three month program of formation for formators (et oui!) and take time for their respective responsibilities in formation and organization of the house. This program of studies covers: spiritual direction, attentive listening skills, globalization and its effects on religious life, role of formators, relationship and sexuality, problems related to discernment, etc.

Celebrations

August has been a month of many celebrations that has provided the community with many opportunities of insertion and inculturation. For example, the Feast of Saint Ignatius (July 30th) was highly celebrated by our Jesuit neighbours at the Ateneo to culminate the Jesuits' Jubilee of the First Companions. We were invited to a huge concelebrated mass in the sports court with a crowd of 2,000 and over a hundred priests. Dancers and costumes of the different parts of the country brought life and colors to the entrance and offertory processions. The Jesuit jubilarians were recognized at the end of the Mass, one celebrating seventy years of priesthood (!) was astonished to recognize himself on the giant screen. Merienda was offered to all the participants after the celebration.

Our celebration of the Feast of the Assumption lasted three days…

On Sunday August 13th, we had our community celebration with our Manila candidates in attendance: 20 of us all together. On the next day, the whole family of the Assumption came together at the College in San Lorenzo (Makati). Festivities were organized for the entire day among which a lecture by a Jesuit priest, Manuel Francisco, on Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical Deus caritas est and by Tony Meloto (recipient of the Ramon Magsaysay Award, the Asian version of the Nobel prize), a friend of the Assumption, who gave an up-date on the successful housing program for squatters that he has launched and with which Assumption is in partnership. Vespers followed and the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament while the three Assumptionist priests were hearing confessions; the Mass of the Vigil was celebrated in the grand auditorium of the College, with the presence of an "old girl" of the College, Mrs Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, President of the Republic. Just imagine the emotions of Fr. Chuvi who presided the Mass and gave the homily… On the Feast proper, the community went to the college of the Religious of the Assumption in Antipolo, a eastern suburb of Manila, for a school Mass with 2,000 girls all dressed in white, the festive costume of the institution. During the Mass, flowers were offered to the statue of Mary but also baskets of food for the victims of the eruption Mayon volcano in Bicol. Late afternoon of that same day, we were back in San Lorenzo for a Mass with the alumnae… and once again President Arroyo was in attendance. During the Mass, ten lay associates pronounced their commitment to live according to the ideals and principles of education of Mother Marie-Eugénie. At the merienda following the Mass, Frs Bernard and Gilles ended up at the table of the President. She looked worried - the Parliament was deliberating about a possible impeachment. Obviously, her presence there had much to do with looking for a quiet moment and drawing new strength. She remained silent during the prayers but sang proudly the Assumpta est, the official song of the College and of the Philippine Province of the Religious of the Assumption.

The Feast of Saint Augustine (August 28th), main patron saint of our Congregation, was another opportunity of great festivities!!! We anticipated the feast on Sunday the 27th in the afternoon, in order to celebrate the renewal of temporary vows of Bros. Alex Castro and Clemente Boleche, a first for the Assumptionists in the Philippines and for the families of our brothers. Dressed in their newly cut white Assumptionist habits, the choir of the religious made a deep impression on the crowd gathered for the Eucharist (87+ people!). The cousins of Bro. Alex from Pampanga had prepared a sumptuous dinner that followed the celebration. The atmosphere was truly Augustinian and the guests had some difficulty to cut short their stay during the festivities. On the next day, the community was invited by the Augustinians of the parish of Our Lady of Guadalupe (the second oldest churches in Manila, built in 1601) for Mass and Fiesta. The Augustinian Order was the first to arrive in the country with the boats of Magellan and to bring the Christian faith to the Philippines. After the Mass, we were invited for the meal, dances and signing in the cloister of the convent, along with seminarians and parishioners. Some of our talented young religious were also on hand for the karaoke. The night was clear and the weather perfect: a real postcard! A few days later, Frs. Bernard and Gilles took part in the Final vows celebration of an Augustinian sister who follows the same formation for formators, another opportunity to link with the Augustinian family in the Philippines.

This series of festivities finally ended last September 15th with a concert at the auditorium of the College in San Lorenzo featuring some 30 priests of the diocese of Imus (Cavite) and their bishop, Mgr. Chito Tagle, a performer himself. It was a fund raising activity for the building of a house for the retired priests of their diocese. A genuine atmosphere of classical religious songs and also modern hits and dances made the presentation a happy event showing the dreams and struggles of the clergy and, surely, their close relations and friendship with their young bishop. Some of them were just back from a tour in the US and in France. Also on stage, a popular Filipino singer and devoted Christian, Jose Mari Chan, with his daughter Liza, some 30 kids of the mission school of the Religious of the Assumption in Malibay… At the end of the concert, after the sung solemn blessing of the bishop, there was a concluding Christmas carol! Indeed, the Philippines hold the world record of length of the Christmas Season festivities: from September to February! We had seen our first Christmas street decorations, but this was really our first carol. All these fiestas are deeply part of the Filipino culture.

Ecology workshop

At the end of July, Fr. Chuvi participated in an eco-camp in Antique. It was organized by the Religious of the Assumption for a hundred or so teachers or staff of their various schools from the Visayas. The goal of the camp was to discover the many treasures of nature in and around Sibalom: river, waterfalls, mountain, forest and gemstones. “On the first day, we had a difficult climbing of the Tigbalua Mountain through rocky paths, to reach our camping site, some way up

in the mountain. We discovered there the Filipino traditional way of cooking rice and chicken in bamboos over open fire. We all tasted this delicacy and shared also the meal offered to us by Tigbalua villagers. Tree-planting was an experience of giving back to the earth the trees that have been cut down by illegal loggers. After the picnic, we continued our difficult climbing and descending of the forest mountain. It was slippery tiring but enjoyable. On the second day, all of us on top of two trucks, we went to the Sibalom River. But because of rain, we were not able to collect many gemstones. We miss the chance of experiencing them processed by the local stone craft… Through friendship, prayer and sharing, the Eco-Peace camp enhanced and deepened our experience last May of the seminar on Justice and Peace in Kauswagan." (See: Chronicles no. 4) The community is getting ready for its futureThe community in Manila decided not to get involved in regular ministry for its first eighteen months so that it avails itself with a proper time of experiencing the Filipino culture and discerning its future apostolate. In the meantime though, limited ministry has been accepted: day retreats, confessions, Masses, spiritual direction, etc. In the near future, the student brothers will begin a weekly apostolate. Our main task is still the construction of the community and formation, special attention to vocations and the poor, Christian faith education and media.

And is attentive to the poorIndeed, in the Philippines, it is not Christmas all year around for many people… We begin discovering more and more of this other face of the country, that of poverty and even misery that affect a majority of the population.

Discovering Navotas

Two volunteers, a Belgian and a French, Olivia and Adeline, members of Point-Coeur, had invited the community to discover Navotas, a very poor neighbourhood by the sea port. They brought us through the narrow back streets where hundreds of wooden shacks built one against the other are home for as many families, in the midst of sewage water canals. That Sunday morning when we were visiting, the ground was still humid with the previous day typhoon and high tide that frequently flood the area. Some families have found no other refuge than under the bridges, sheds built between arches, without light, suspended over filthy water.

All around, you can see groups of children running, laughing, playing with rubbish yet with eyes so brilliant, satisfied with makeshift toys and only begging for smile and a little affection. We were warmly welcomed. Men seated in the sun were inviting us for a drink while children were pleased dancing around these visitors. A former seaman who had travelled around Africa came out of his hut with a black doll brought back from his travel. A group of people calls on a young coloured girl of the neighbourhood: "Come and see your uncle…!", when seeing Fr. Chuvi. She is born of a Filipina mother and a Ghanian father and is just so happy to be photographed with

an African priest.

The squatters of our own neighbourhood

One night, we invited for a dinner four ladies of the parish who teach catechism to children of some poor areas of our parish. Fr. Chuvi then went to spend an afternoon with them in Marytown Village. Here are some of his impressions: “Like Manila City in general, the neighbourhood of Our Lady of Pentecost parish is characterized by two opposite social realities. The church is in the middle-class Loyola Heights subdivision, next to the Jesuit Ateneo de Manila University and to the Miriam College. There are six chapels in poor areas where Christians gather for prayers and catechism. Saturday August 26, I visited Marytown village with Sr. Lornie, a Franciscan Missionary, and a volunteer catechist. She took me to this congested place through a dark, narrow short-cut way, between simple shanty houses built under high tension electrical wires and in a flooding area. About forty kids aged between six and twelve years old, attend religious instruction there. They welcomed me with charm after the sister introduced me to them as an Assumptionist priest. I enjoyed attending the one hour lesson with them in Tagalog. But their greater attention was turned to me: it is the first time they meet a black man! It was a nice discovery. The immersion will continue next time.”

The new priest in our parish came and spent an evening with us. After Vespers and the Eucharist that he presided, we had a long talk with him during dinner about the realities of the parish and our possible future ministry in the parish, mainly with the poor people. Fr. Bong is well documented with social issues and he is even moderator in a conflict opposing the residents and the squatters of the area. The first are obsessed by questions of security and have built a wall all around the subdivision, obliging the squatters to travel all around to get to school, market, job and church. How to reconcile the interests of one group and the other?

When we first arrived in the parish, beggars were knocking at our door regularly, telling us their stories or inventing them, especially to the foreign priests of the community… As we refused to give them money and would only offer food, they kind of disappeared… letting us wonder about our recipes. But the numerous handicapped, blind or poor people begging at the street corners remain a difficult thing for us. We are also uneasy witnesses of police violence chasing away street vendors.

With social advocacy organizations

One evening, we invited at our table representatives of the Task Force on Urban Conscientization (TFUC), one of the mission partners of the Association of Major Superiors in the Philippines. During their presentation, our candidates were here and they were quite frank about the whole situation as they see it. They are ready to help us for immersion projects and regular apostolate.

We are also close to AMA, a lay volunteer program of the Religious of the Assumption. Bro. Clem, himself a former AMA volunteer, participated in the 20th anniversary celebration of the group in Baguio. Two French girls, Marie and Estelle, were completing their stay in a school of Antique and were available for a meal with our community. Rodel who is one of our candidates from Iloilo is now having a year with the AMA program in Malibay, a poor neighbourhood of Manila where the Religious of the Assumption and the Little Sisters of the Assumption live and work, and also where two of our candidates go every day, Glenn as a teacher, and Eugene as a volunteer in a day care center.

Our vocation ministry

The vocation ministry is another important concern of our community. We are presently in contact with 24 young men interested to the Assumptionist community life. Those who live in Manila come to spend 24 hours with us once a month and meet other visiting Assumptionist. We need to invent ways to gather together those from Iloilo or Cagayan de Oro.

In September and October, each diocese organizes different activities to promote vocations to priesthood or religious life. Soon after his arrival into the country, Bro. Ricky was at hand to participate in the general assembly of the Vocation promoters of our own diocese. He reports: “More than 70 religious congregations were present to the meeting. We heard a presentation on ‘the Profile of the Youth in the Philippines’, a research project by the McCann Survey Group last year. We were given animation skills to equip the vocation ministers in accompaniment and search-in retreats. Some updates were also given on the Vocation Awareness Campaign of this year, to be launched on September 16 during a Vocation-Café evening, with entertainment, food, music and informal conversations: some 300 participants are expected.”

Five members of the community will take part actively in this “Café”; we will present also to others celebrations and events, especially in this places where our sisters work. The next Chronicles will report of that.

Bayard exploring possibilities of investingAt the end of August, the community was happy to receive for ten days Bro. Didier Remiot from the community of Morère (Paris). He is the director of Bayard Presse Investment and he is in charge of international development of Bayard. He was in Manila, following a mission in Cambodia and in Vietnam, to participate in the Manila International Book Fair. He was able to meet a number of publishers as well as distributors, especially dealing with youth publications and religious books. When back in Paris, he will submit his report on possible investment of Bayard in the Philippines, a country with the largest number of Catholics in Asia. Our community will follow with great interest the development of this dossier, ready to help in any way in the coming years. Bro. Didier will remember the early morning cock-o-doodle-do of our neighbour's rooster and the pollution of the capital, as well as the warm welcome of the community.

Brief news

Dry rainy season
This is the rainy season, yet it did not rain for three weeks now, with temperatures up to 35 degree Celsius: where are we?

Worse oil spill ever in the Philippines
You must have read it in your newspaper: an old tanker sank near the island of Guimaras, a famous fishing area in the Visayas. The tanker was filled with two million liters of oil and 200,000 liters have been spilled in the sea and spoiling 300 km of coast land. Now, 17,000 have been displaced, mainly fishermen, due to the high level of toxic gas fumes. It took nearly three weeks for emergency aid to get organized.

Migrating work force, our new heroes?
Ten per cent of the Filipino population work abroad. That is almost 8 million of mostly young adults. Paradoxically, this is encouraged from all sides. Private universities adapt their formation programs to this new market and buy huge public adds in order to recruit students for export: technicians, telephone operators, computer specialists, nurses for Asia, the Middle-East, the US and Europe where a nurse will receive a higher salary than a doctor here in the Philippines. These OFW (Overseas Filipino Workers), as they are called here, constitute the first national income for the country, 1 billion dollars a month, and support financially their families here. But at what price humanly and socially? See the number of broken families and children raised by relatives!

Journalist: dangerous job here
We know a family who had to sell their last piece of land in order to silence the local daily news so that it would not report on a bad case involving a family member. We are told that this is

common here. At the same time, journalists are victims of their enquiry reports and they constitute the main targets of the extra-judicial killings in the Philippines, a not so glorious record breaking attribute.

A stronger peso and an economy on the rise
The peso is getting stronger day by day against the US dollar but the economic growth never gets to the poorest. Prices are on the rise every day; we see that at the grocery…

Pictures
If you want to see some pictures of our community, you may consult the following sites:
- www.assomption.org
- www.assumption.org
- www.assumption.us

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