Adveniat House - Manila

January 2007

First Christmas and first New Year in the Philippines

No doubt, Christmas is the most popular celebration in the Philippines. It goes on through five consecutive months: a world record!

As early as September, the main stores are decorated with Christmas lights and one can hear the traditional carols; it will spread to the streets and the subway. Christmas trees appear at street corners and squares. In October, decorations get to the homes, even during the typhoons and the rainy season. By the end of November, Christmas celebrations get more numerous: liturgical celebrations, Masses, meals, exchange gifts, carolings… in schools, offices, work places, organizations… Even the guards in front of the stores and the subway entrances have exchanged their usual caps for the red Santa Claus bonnet!

Simbang Gabi and Carolings

The climax of the Christmas preparations comes with the Novena Masses called *Simbang Gabi* or *Misa de Gallo* (before the cock crows). It starts on December 16, at 4:30 am, in every single church of the Philippines, with standing room only. For nine consecutive days, most people will attend this early Mass or an evening Mass in honour of the Blessed Virgin. It is a time of preparation for Christmas but also a time of prayer for the perseverance in the faith of the Filipino nation. At the end of the Mass – in the past people would go on to their works in the fields - a copious breakfast is served with local specialties: famous *bibingka* (a kind of rice cake) or *puto bungbong* (flavoured rice cooked in bamboo nodes).

Jean-Marie Chuvi was the most regular to these Masses among us all. Invited by the Missionaries Servants of the Poor, he presided these early Masses from December 16 to the Eve of Christmas in the Parish of the Resurrection in Laguna, one hundred kilometres South of Manila. It was a good opportunity for him to practice his *Tagalog*. Here is what he reports:

« At this time of the year, priests have to say Masses everywhere, in all churches and small chapels of the numerous barrios since all the Christians want to participate in these early morning or evening Masses. There are Christmas lights all around, a symbol of Christ coming to us. Just imagine the difficulty of a novice like me to adapt to this rhythm. Thank God, Brother Mami, my Filipino acolyte, was on hand to wake me up on time and correct my homily in Tagalog. At times, some English words jumped into my text, which here is typical taglish (Tagalog-English). Insecure at the beginning, I became more confident as the days went by. I could discover a new aspect of the Filipino culture made out of generosity, sharing and love: the families spontaneously open their homes and invite for meals, godfathers offer presents, bosses are generous with their employees. It is really a great moment of joy and of true sharing. »

Another tradition is the *carolling*. Groups are formed and go from house to house singing Christmas Carols, for the joy of the household… then for small gifts or candies. The candidates living with us have wished to get our voices together as well in order to offer our own performance. The idea was to get some extra money for health care or to help families in trouble because of the typhoons or illness. Choir practices were numerous and were coming on top of the usual fatigue of the end of the year. The result was not as great as our efforts but it was a first try anyway. Here are some of the pieces:
Day of Joy
(Haendel and Beethoven),
Miraculous Night
,
Do you hear what I hear
,
Pasko na Sinta ko
(San Pedro, a famous native composer),
Christmas Wish
,
Star
, and a traditional
Gloria
.

A busy Christmas season

The week before Christmas was quite busy. You know Jean-Marie Chuvi's schedule. The other members of the community were also very active: see for yourselves.

Tuesday, December 19: in the afternoon, we sing for the Religious of the Assumption and some former students of their college living in the neighbourhood. It was our most successful performance and the excellent snack that followed will be remembered...

Wednesday, December 20: the whole community takes part in the *Vigil* at Assumption-Antipolice, a school run by the Religious of the Assumption on the hills overlooking Manila. From 6:00 pm to 11:30 pm, a few hundred students with their teachers, staff and parents meet in the gymnasium for a long adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and for confessions or counselling in tents scattered around the eco-park.

In the morning of December 21, at 4:30 am, people from the neighbourhood join us for the Sambaing Gabi Mass followed by breakfast where everyone becomes a friend of his neighbour. In the evening, the community is invited at a lawyer's home for an outdoor diner with the extended family and friends. They staged a living Nativity with the proper costumes, carols and meditations on the mystery of the new born King; the program included also games, gifts and more food (we are in the Philippines, aren't we!). It was a long day and we hit home at 11:00 pm.

Friday, December 22, in the afternoon, we celebrated a special Christmas Mass with the workers renovating our new residence… followed by a well prepared *marina* and the distribution of the Christmas presents: a bonus pay, a Chinese ham ball and *Queso de bola*, the traditional season's piece of cheese.

In the evening, we all went to one of the squatter area to offer our carlings. It was one of our most memorable event of this first Christmas in the Philippines. Around one hundred kids and their parents were on hand to listen to our songs, banging the beat with their spoons and bowls (forget about the quality of the tunes!) since *lugaw*, a rice and chicken soup was to be offered to all right after. Some ladies we know had offered to prepare this traditional snack; there were plenty of left over for the next day too.

Saturday, December 23 was a free day… to do some shopping for our own gifts and to prepare the celebration of the community. We had a joyful visit, that of Sister Micaela de Wilde, General Counsellor of the Little Sisters of the Assumption. We shared about our present and future collaboration between our both communities, namely our apostolate with the poor people and our Vocation ministry.

Christmas in family

December 24 was a long day. It started with the Simbang Gabi Mass at 4:30 am in our own parish. The three priests concelebrated with Bishop Honesto Ongtioco, the spiritual leader of our Diocese of Cubao. The church was full for this last day of the Novena. After the Mass, we shared the breakfast with the Bishop in the parish hall.

At noon, we had decided to have our Christmas dinner. On the menu: ham, roasted turkey, red wine and cheese, cake and ice cream. After dishes and a too short siesta, the community came together for the exchange of gifts, songs and sharing. For this exercise, each one was invited to choose from one of the titles of Christ: Prince of Peace, Son of God, Saviour, Friend of the Poor, Good Shepherd, Servant… and elaborate on what it had meant for him during the past year.

At 6:00 pm, we gathered at the Religious of the Assumption in San Lorenzo for the celebration of the birth of Christ. Here is how one of the young sisters reports on the evening

celebration:

“On the Eve of Christmas, three Assumption families were gathered to celebrate the birthday of Jesus. There were 27 Assumption Sisters, 13 Assumptionists (Fathers, Brothers and Candidates) and 6 Little Sisters of the Assumption.

We all filled the Marie Eugenie Chapel with heartfelt voices to welcome the Lord. A very short practice and orientation for the midnight mass followed right after Vespers. A festive dinner prolonged the first Christmas Eve celebration.

At 9 pm the much-awaited 'midnight' mass started. All lights in the school chapel vicinity were turned off except for the spotlight on the manger with Mary and Joseph waiting for Jesus to arrive.

Bro. Ricky sang "O Holy Night" as every Sister holding a child processed. Sisters on wheel chair said it was a moving sight towards the crib. San Lo chapel overflowed with smiling families, watching their young sons and daughters pass by. Finally, Sr. Gertrude laid the baby Jesus in the manger which prompted the assembly to kneel down and pray.

After a moment of silence and when each one was back to their respective places the celebrants Fr. Bernard, Fr. Gilles and Fr. Chuvi, entered solemnly, too. Two powerful choirs: the AA's and the Sunshine Choir led the sung liturgy. Fr. Bernard delivered a beautiful homily inspiring us all to be good children of God.

Right after the Agnus Dei, all 46 religious including the four sisters in their wheelchairs came forward to renew their vows. Every word was clearly proclaimed using one formula differing only in the part (underlined): "… I vow to live in poverty, chastity and obedience according to the Rule of Life of the Religious/ Augustinians/ Little Sisters of the Assumption. Truly it was a moving experience of making a public profession to a life of love, a life for others - a life for God.

The tradition of kissing the baby Jesus created a long line of families in. And of course, picture taking is always part of the ritual. One family even placed their own baby on Jesus' crib while his own father carried the baby Jesus in his arms.

The gathering didn't end after the mass because many families stayed for the agape. The Sisters lovingly prepared and served hot chocolate, cookies and biscuits for everyone to share. They also gave away candy cane for the little children. Everybody went home happy, renewed and inspired. Jesus is once again born in each one's heart."

The whole Assumption family was gathered for the *Noche Buena* in a fine mixture of French wine and cheese and Filipino pastries.

The Sisters of the College gave us quite a gift. Each year, they produce a calendar; this year, it was the work of their Art Department students. On the last page, there was a presentation of our community with pictures. Wow! Will it attract new vocations?

All throughout Christmas day, children would ring at our door and sing carols in order to receive candies or money. Because of this tradition, the Central Bank of the Philippines prints new small bills! As for us, we had no new bills but rather chocolates and coins. Next Christmas, the bursar will need to foresee a more generous budget…

On Saint Steven's Day, December 26, the community was the guest of the Little Sisters of the Assumption in Malibay along with the neighbouring community of the Religious of the Assumption in order to celebrate the feast of their Founder, Fr. Etienne Pernet, and the 40th anniversary of religious profession of Sister Micaela (Argentine) and of Sister Liliana (Chile). It was a joyous celebration of food, songs, and dances.

The diaspora came on December 27. The Filipino brothers went to their families. Gilles and Bernard went to Cebu in order to explore the possibility of buying a property in this second largest city of the country for our future novitiate. They were the guests of the Augustinians at the Basilica of the Santo Nino (Jesus of Prague), one of the most popular devotions in the Philippines. The Basilica holds a dozen Masses a day with crowds in attendance at all time. They met also with Cardinal Ricardo Vidal who is most willing to welcome our Congregation in his Diocese. Meanwhile, Jean-Marie Chuvi was the guardian of our house in Manila with Hector; they were hosting a possible candidate, Ronald, from Cagayan de Oro.

Happy New Year 2007

All the brothers were back on time, on December 31st, in order to jump together into the New Year. At 10:30 pm, we celebrated a Mass of thanksgiving for this first year of our community in the Philippines, for the support and friendship that we received from all of you. We entrusted to the Lord the coming year and prayed for all your intentions.

The second part of the celebration was out in the street. We joined our neighbours making as much noise as possible to scare the evil spirits and admiring the fireworks which lasted for more than an hour… Quite a surprise for the Westerners among us! The sun was slowly coming out when the noise quieted down…

A VERY HAPPY NEW YEAR TO YOU TOO!

MANIGONG BAGONG TAON!

Santo Niño

The devotion of the Santo Niño (Holy Child) is the oldest and one or the most popular in the Philippines. When Legazpi landed on the island of Cebu in 1565, one of his soldiers found an image of the Child Jesus. It is believed to be the same statue Magellan had given to the wife oft the chieftain of the island after her baptism. The image is venerated today in the Basilica of Cebu. For Filipino Catholics the Holy Child represents a God who is accessible to all and can be approached without fear. The devotion instils the virtues of simplicity, obedience, and trust in God. At the same time it calls for mature discipleship and loving service to all.

January 28, 2007

Pictures: if you want to view some pictures of the community, consult the following:

www.assomption.org

www.assumptio.org

www.assumptio.us

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