CHRONICLES FROM MANILA
May – August 2007

The many activities of everyone have slowed down the writing of this present Chronicle. You will read about the life of the community in Manila during a trimester, fully loaded: vocation retreats, the end of the renovation and the moving into the new house, our community holidays, a new school year, new pastoral commitments, formation programs… all of this within the general background, the canonization of Marie-Eugénie of Jesus, the foundress of the Religious of the Assumption.

Three vocation retreats

After our Intensive French Summer Camp, the workers at our new house were just about to leave. We were so happy to move in at last, and make our home in this newly-renovated building. There was only the landscape that needed to be completed. The blessing of the house is scheduled this November, during the canonical visit of our Superior General. We will then tour you around virtually.

We were still unpacking from our previous activity and it was already time to split the group in three for our May Vocation Retreats in three different places: Antipolo, Antique and Cagayan de Oro. We were able to reach out to some thirty young men interested to know more about our way of life, some of whom we have been in contact for some time now. These retreats usually consist of a moment of sharing about the life of each other, some news from our religious congregation, a time of prayer, Bible sharing and discussion on the mission of the Church at large. As always the meals became a good time spent together.

Community holidays

After the retreats, the whole community got together for common holidays in Bohol, a small island in the middle part of the country. In Panglao, our usual program dealt with rest, discoveries, sharing in formal or informal meetings and common prayer. At eight in the morning, we came together for prayer and breakfast; the rest of the morning was free for swimming, walking around, surfing the net or reading. At noon, we would prepare a simple lunch then have a siesta and enjoy the rest of the afternoon according to each one's favorite activity. By late afternoon, we would get together again for a time of sharing, the Eucharist and a dinner on the beach: one will just have to choose the preferred fish, seafood and vegetables to eat and the restaurant would cook them! We would then close the day with a card game or a stroll on the beach.

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We had a few outings. The first one was a general discovery of the island of Bohol. We were able to visit a number of very old churches built by the Jesuits in the XVIIth century and to get an idea of their ministry and presence in the island at that time. We had a lunch stop on a boat while we were taken upstream on the beautiful green river Loboc -- a fantastic scenery. We were delighted by our discovery of the Chocolate Hills, a unique geological formation of round shaped hills (some 1,200 of them!). From a distance, it has the appearance of a field of giant chocolate tips in the middle of rice fields and coconut trees especially during summer. A classic tourist stop brought us to admire the tarsiers, the world's smallest monkeys, really looking like E.T. with their long fingers and unproportionately big eyes (hunting for their food at night and almost blind in daytime).

Our next outing was at sea. We rented the service of a small boat for the day and the excursion brought us to a small island surrounded by a lagoon, the Virgin Island, where we had our picnic. Through a low seabed that gave all sorts of nuances of blue shades we reached the island of Balicasag and had a swim above its impressive coral rift. Unfortunately the people on the island are quite poor and ill prepared to receive a flow of tourists. They have transformed their traditional wooden houses into modern sand block and metal sheet roof bungalows that all look the same: what a disaster!

After this week-long holidays, the brothers enjoyed a short visit to their respective families while Gilles, among the «foreign missionaries», was the first to hit home (family visit comes every three years). So, he was in Québec for one month of fund-raising and one month of vacation with his family. Fr. Bernard and Jean-Marie Chuvi stayed as home-bodies and concentrated in searching for pastoral commitments for the community.

New beginnings: community life and school year

One community in two houses

At the start of this new school year, the community chose to live in two houses: the house of the theologians and postulancy (Adveniat House) and that of the candidates (Pavel House). In the light of last year's experience, it seemed wiser to separate the different levels of formation; young religious in formation and candidates now live in separate houses.

In Adveniat House, you will find Frs. Bernard Holzer (Superior), Gilles Blouin (treasurer), Jean-Marie Chuvi, and Bros. Alex Castro, Eduardo Molina and Ricky Montanez, as well as a postulant, Joseph Macalanggan.

In Pavel House, just a three minute walk around the corner, live three candidates: Blair, Glenn and Rowell. A fourth candidate joined them in August, Rodel. Fr. Chuvi and Bro. Ed alternate weekly to be with them: they are co-responsible for the formation of the candidates. On weekends, both groups come together at Adveniat House.

The life of the community has been taken up by the evaluation of the first 18 months of our presence in Manila and the preparation of the renewal of vows of Bros. Alex, Clemente and Eduardo. After an in-depth discernment, Bro. Clem has decided not to renew his vows and left the Congregation. He is back with his family, is finishing his studies in Pastoral Theology and eventually hopes to find a job. During the Sunday Vespers of August 26th, the community bid Clem farewell and he in turn showed his appreciation for the 5 years he spent with Assumption in the USA and in the Philippines.

Beginning of classes

The new academic year started on June 13th: courses in Theology for Bros. Alex, Eduardo and Ricky, courses in Philosophy for our postulant, Joseph, and our candidate, Rowell. Fr. Chuvi started studies in Education to Social Justice at the Saint Augustine Institute of the Regina Carmeli University run by the Augustinian Sisters. It is located in Malolos, an hour's ride north of Manila. In his social analysis study, he has started a research on «Religious beliefs and practices of the Daan Tubo Catholics», a neighbouring squatter area where the community has initiated a pastoral commitment (see below).

The two other candidates, Blair and Glenn, teach at the two schools run by the Religious of the Assumption. The former teaches English Literature in San Lorenzo while the latter teaches Mathematics and Christian Living in Malibay.

Community pastoral commitmentsDuring its local chapter and various meetings, the Manila community has attempted to be incarnated in the reality of the Philippines through its pastoral project, targeting more and more the responsibilities of each religious.

"Our apostolate will be defined gradually, by being attentive to the needs of the Filipino people and becoming more involved in their life. In addition to vocation ministry and formation, we envision involvement in the world of education and communications, with a special attention to the poor."

Vocation Ministry

With the support and participation of the other members of the community, Gilles and Ricky took charge of the Vocation Ministry, keeping regular contacts with young men wishing to dedicate their life to God and the service of others. Regularly, they organize visits and search-in retreats; they go to vocation campaigns organized by various dioceses and meetings of vocation promoters.

Young people of the Manila area have monthly gatherings at Adveniat House. These overnight gatherings consist of sessions, mutual discovery, spiritual formation, talks on initiation to prayer and to the charism of the Assumption, one-on-one dialogue with the formators as well as very fraternal meals. Gilles and Ricky are also foreseeing the production of promotional materials and booklets to foster the knowledge of the Congregation and its founder, Fr. Emmanuel d'Alzon. From time to time, a longer discovery visit will be planned for some candidates. They try to collaborate in their ministry with the sister Congregations of the Assumption family.

A new residence for the candidates

Another level of formation allows young people to experience living together as a community while pursuing professional work or studies. In order to allow them such an experience in the best of conditions, the community has rented a house in the immediate neighborhood of Adveniat. They moved in on June 17th and had a house blessing on July 1st. The owners of the house, a delegation of the Religious of the Assumption led by the Provincial and some Little Sisters of the Assumption were present for the open-house. One of the resident-candidates explained why they have chosen the name of Pavel House for the residence."Father Pavel Djidjov was the youngest of the three Blessed Assumptionist Bulgarian Martyrs. He was an athlete and was also a responsible bursar. He invested most of his time and energy to the education of young people. In his stint as a teacher, he was known for his strong stand against the Communist Party in Bulgaria. He defended religious freedom in the face of a totalitarian regime. He was very loyal to the Church and he was also greatly admired by his students.

We chose to name this house in honor of the youngest Assumptionist Martyr. We chose him to be our spiritual guide, our beacon, our model. At such a young age, he was always attuned to the promptings of the Lord. Having realized that martyrdom was his inevitable fate, he wrote: "A diocesan priest has been condemned to death, another to twenty years in prison, two

others will soon be put on trial. We're awaiting our turn... May God's will be done."Beginning of the postulancy of Joseph Macalanggan

After the blessing of the Pavel House, all the guests gathered for Vespers at Adveniat. After a year spent living with us, Joseph Macalanggan started his postulancy officially, the last step he will take before the novitiate. During the first semester, he will complete the required courses in Philosophy before starting Theology. Next semester will be focused on courses in Spirituality and Religious Life. He is accompanied by Fr. Bernard.

Renewal of vows of Bros. Eduardo Molina and Alex Castro
On August 28th, feast of Saint Augustine, in the midst of his family, friends and all the Superiors of the Religious of the Assumption, Bro. Ed renewed his vows for one year. A simple buffet followed and allowed everybody to continue the sharing.

Alex Castro was in Bulgaria to take part in an international seminar on our Eastern European Mission; this was where he renewed his vows, in Plovdiv, the town of our Blessed Martyrs.

“We've just ended the first week with a visit to the Assumptionist mission parish [Pokrovan] almost three hours away from Plovdiv. The people there were very welcoming and the church was almost filled during the Divine Liturgy. After lunch, we had time to go around the village and some of us went back to the bus with watermelons, grapes, flowers, eggs and other farm produce given by the villagers.

All the sessions were very interesting. We were introduced to the ecclesial reality of the Eastern Churches specifically in Bulgaria presented by the Apostolic Exarch; Bishop Louis-Armel Pelâtre had a presentation on Turkey; Nicodeme Frolov on Russia. We also had visits to the Rila Monastery, revered as the center of Bulgarian Orthodoxy. Its cult is centered on St. John Rila whose tomb and relics are preserved at the Monastery Church. Pilgrims, mostly Orthodox, flock to the place. It is like the Lourdes of Bulgaria.

Lastly, I had the privilege to witness momentous events in my religious life here. I celebrated my birthday here last Aug. 26 and my renewal of vows last Aug. 28, St. Augustine's day. The renewal was simple but very memorable. We did it during night prayers, and I renewed my vows in the hands of Fr. Julio Navarro. The liturgy was in Spanish since it's the Latinos' turn to

animate the liturgy which made some of the Oblate sisters wondering if I was Chileno. It ended with the kiss of peace to all the participants. After the liturgy, there was a simple cocktail. But during the dinner, the African sisters surprised me with an African with a procession of a cake baked for me. It was a lot of fun.

All the conferences were in French and I was still struggling with my French. Fr. André Brombart made a lot of effort translating the sessions for us in English since the supposed translators were not able to get their Shenghen visas. Nevertheless, I still managed with my little knowledge of French especially in simple conversations. But my Spanish came in very handy since I could communicate better in Spanish than in French..."

Shaping up of a Formation Program

The various steps of formation, as you can imagine, constitute quite a challenge for those who are new as formators, and new to the country and its culture. Thus, while others are enrolled in their studies, Frs. Bernard, Gilles and Chuvi are themselves being formed at the Psycho-Spiritual Formation Center, Emmaus. The center was founded 50 years ago and is run by the Jesuits. It is located at the campus of the Ateneo. They follow various lectures on formation and meet with formators of other religious congregations. They are now shaping up the programs of formation for the different levels of formation, from the very first contacts, to the candidates, to the diaconate, to the priesthood, and throughout the formation years of a religious. In consultation with the Provincial Superior, they are exploring the idea of opening a novitiate as well as the future of their program of formation.

At the end of August, the community was happy to receive for ten days Fr. Miguel Diaz, an Assumptionist from Mexico. He has been appointed recently Director of Formation of the North American Province, to which the community in the Philippines belongs. His visit among us has been hectic and productive: meetings with the formators, with the brothers in formation, with the candidates, with the community as a whole, discovery of our activities and those of the Assumption family… No time for tourism, except for a visit of Intramuros, the historical center of Manila, and of the Mall of Asia. He was also present at the Thanksgiving Mass for the canonization of Mother Marie-Eugénie of Jesus, at the Manila Cathedral. Thanks to his experience, expertise and objectivity, he was able to help the community focus more precisely on its objectives in terms of formation.

The participation of Fr. Bernard to the annual meeting of the Major Superiors of the Philippines (some 300 Provincials and Superiors) is another venue for formation. This year theme is: "The asphyxiations in community life" or why life in community can become heavy and how one can bring little dynamism to its members.

Fr. Bernard has also accepted to give spiritual direction to ten priests and religious presently in their sabbatical at the East Asia Pastoral Institute, at the Ateneo campus of the Jesuits. It is another way for him to understand the Asian soul. Twice a month, he will receive these directees for an hour each; they come from Malaysia, China, Vietnam, Indonesia and Oceania.

Getting closer to the poor

Another priority of the community is to work more closely with the poor. Bro. Ricky Montanez, as you know, visits regularly a prison for young people in Quezon City with Blair and some of our candidates.

At the beginning of September, after considerable thinking and talking, our parish priest entrusted to our community the pastoral responsibility of one of the seven squatter areas inside the parish boundaries: Daan Tubo. This pastoral work will evolve gradually and for the moment Fr. Chuvi will preside Mass in their chapel two Sundays a month. Bros. Alex and Ed, along with two candidates, help with the catechesis of the children. Thanks to his research work, Chuvi will discover little by little the complex reality of the neighbourhood where tensions are high. His first impressions on the country, which he was recently sharing with his African brothers, are similar in the context of his new pastoral commitment.

Jean-Marie Chuvi is from the Democratic Republic of Congo. After his theological studies in Nairobi (Kenya), he was parish priest for eight years in our Assumptionist parish of Arusha (Tanzania). He shares:

«Landing in a country with more than 7,000 islands in Southeast Asia brings you far from home, really! The Philippines is a highly Americanized country, but still rooted in the Asian way of life. The Filipinos are more silent than the Africans.

Little by little, one gets acquainted with new ways of thinking and behaving. One thing is striking here: the human warmth. Filipinos welcome you warmly. However, as it is anywhere, one needs to be careful not to be taken advantage of. The people’s warmth could be attributed to Filipino close family ties. This is reflected when young people come to community life; they want to recreate the family atmosphere. For sure, when coming from a less-relational culture, as the Congolese Assumptionist Fr. Oswald would say, it is hard to share what you see as valuable; what is of great value to you may not exactly be what these people consider

important. When we arrived, a Claretian priest living in the country for many years told us one day: just love them and you'll see that everything will be all right! Sometimes we feel like saying that all this is childish but one has to get into the culture and mentality in order to understand it. Indeed, the Filipino culture spurs us to keep learning to love, to go the extra mile, as the spiritual masters would say».Getting to know deeply this slum area will be a long process. The lay leaders will assist us along the way. From time to time, you will read more about it in the next Chronicles. Rightfully so, isn't this what we should be doing if we want to reach out to the Filipinos because these people make up the majority of the 12 million inhabitants of this capital city?Education and mass media

Another area of our community project is education and mass media. Some of our brothers and candidates come from the teaching profession. Blair and Glenn are presently teaching. We help the Sisters in presiding Eucharistic celebrations or hearing confessions in their schools. We are also available for school retreats and spiritual direction.

Bro. Didier Remiot is director of the international division of Bayard, our well-known publishing house in Paris. He has been working hard in bringing its expertise to the Philippines and things are starting to move. Catholic Digest, Living with Christ, and God's Word Today, as well as kids' magazines are now being distributed here. Should subscriptions take on significant numbers, it would be possible to have eventually Asian editions of some of these magazines. Bro. Didier was present at the Manila Book Fair and he communicated other projects in mind. The community will be more than happy to collaborate in this endeavour, especially in giving advice to the two distributing companies working with Bayard which, hard to believe, know very little about how to approach the religious market. Fr. Bernard receives them monthly and helps them discover the various Catholic organizations and how to deal with them. The candidates also are exploring the possibility of self-financing activities in distributing Bayard material through the parishes and Catholic schools.

Visitors, encounters, feasts

Fr. Lucas Chuffart, General Secretary of our Congregation, spent a week with our community on his way to Australia. Here is how he writes about his stay in Manila with the hope of coming back one day.

"A dream came true! Although a storm hit England and British Airways experienced flight irregularities on July 20, I set foot in Manila via Hong Kong (Cathay Pacific), a day earlier as scheduled and to the surprise of the community

What was striking when I arrived was the sight of this gigantic metropolis and the mixture of ultra modern and exclusive neighbourhoods with numerous miserable depressed areas.

Reading regularly the Chronicles of the Assumptionist community during its time of foundation had prepared me to a cultural shock (Tagalog during the liturgy, fish and rice as the basis for meals, popular devotion in daily and parochial life…), and here I am, much at ease in the community's newly renovated residence. I am taken up by the daily schedule of the community, from Lauds at 6:00 am, to start the day with prayer and meditation, until the evening when meeting with groups helping street children, or volunteers associations in links with AMA, or tasting grilled crocodile (yes!) in a nice little restaurant! After, I visited prestigious universities like the Ateneo or Assumption College, where our young Assumptionist religious teach or study, I also discovered popular neighbourhoods, schools, clinics, etc.

I enjoyed visiting with the Little Sisters of the Assumption and seeing how true they are to their charism. They share the life of the poor people. The Religious of the Assumption with their focus on global education in all levels of society promote a genuine insertion into the Filipino culture. That is only a small part of a bigger picture, that of the Assumption family. I am thankful to the members of the community who have helped open my eyes on all these.

The Assumptionist community is very much involved in the parish with other religious congregations in this area of Quezon City and it is also close to the local population. The parish priest appreciates this gesture.

Unfortunately, there was no time to visit the islands and the important historical sites. On the very last day, I experienced the heavy showers (monsoon) and Bernard (Holzer) and I were wet from head to toe, while waiting for a taxi to the airport, standing under one single umbrella: my plane ticket and last pesos were drenched and unreadable.

But I got to come back since the young candidates told me, out of their intensive French camp: You, Father, you talk quite distinctly in French; we can understand you! Thank you, my brothers, for your warm welcome and a great first contact".Aside from the visits of Lucas Chuffart, Miguel Diaz and Didier Remiot, the community welcomed ten volunteers of AMA (Associate Missionaries of the Assumption) on their evaluation seminar, teachers from San Lorenzo for one day of community building, the Provincial Superior of the Community of the Beatitudes, Natacha Brunet, responsible for the volunteers program of the MEP (Paris Foreign Mission), Isabelle Scholl, a relative of Fr. Bernard on her way to China, friends of the brothers and a number of

candidates.

In the Philippines, fiestas are celebrated one after another… and the community had its share of them lately: birthday parties, National Independence Day, Assumption, Saint Augustine, jubilees, anniversaries of vows or of ordination to priesthood…

Canonization of Mother Marie-Eugénie of JesusThese last months have been busy also with the preparation of the canonization celebrations of Mother Marie-Eugénie of Jesus Milleret, foundress of the Religious of the Assumption, friend and spiritual daughter of our own founder, Fr. Emmanuel d'Alzon. Our community was invited to all these celebrations and took part in most of them.

Send-off for the pilgrims

With a total of 5,000 pilgrims of the Assumption expected in Rome for the canonization events, 1,020 were coming with the Philippines-Thailand Province of the Sisters. Some 300 pilgrims from Manila came together in the auditorium of Assumption College in San Lorenzo for a send-off Mass and for final instructions. Fr. Gilles Blouin, himself one of those pilgrims, gave the homily in tune with the spirit of the moment, insisting on the profound meaning of leaving on a pilgrimage: to be transformed by it.

June 3rd: direct TV transmission of the canonization

On June 3rd, the family of the Assumption present in Manila and friends were gathered at Assumption College in San Lorenzo, to follow the live TV broadcast of the canonization in Rome on giant screens. Two Filipino networks were on hand for the event. In Rome, it was raining heavily since early morning and here in the Philippines we were experiencing a drought and a heatwave. Quite frustrating to recognize anybody under the sea of umbrellas… only a small discovered Filipino flag!

In the assembly - all of the sisters from the communities of Manila, Antipolo and Baguio, along with some 450 parents of students or alumnae - you hear peals of applause each time the name of Marie-Eugénie is mentioned. The emotion was high for everyone. After a two hour long celebration, the Sisters invited everybody for an excellent buffet while a band of young students provided the music.

From the desk of our special reporter, Gilles Blouin“On June 3rd at Saint Peter's Square and under heavy showers, Pope Benedict XVI declared Mother Marie-Eugénie a saint, giving her to the universal Church as a model of dedication and holiness for our time. In his homily, the Pope stressed how she was an example of a woman to join contemplation and action. Her congregation is well known indeed for running high profile schools, yet dedicated to a daily life of prayer and adoration. Many representatives of the Assumption family were present for this very special event, namely about 1000 Filipinos led by a delegation of 7 bishops from the Philippines.

Prior to the canonization, there was a Mass at the Basilica of Saint John of Lateran on Saturday morning and a Vigil, at night, in the Church of Saint Gregory VII, very close to the Vatican. On Monday morning, the Archbishop of Paris, Mgr Vingt-Trois, presided a Mass of Thanksgiving at the main altar of Saint-Peter's basilica with all the pilgrims who had come for the canonization, a very moving celebration, under a radiant sun this time.

The evening of the canonization day, a crowd of over 10,000 people joined in a Youth Festival in honor of the new saint at Pope Paul VI Hall, with a program of songs and dances presented by delegations from 14 different countries. The opening presentation was the one from Manila: it provided the tone to an evening of joyful praise for the “fire” that Marie-Eugénie has brought to generations of young people around the world and marked them for their life. Indeed, the world is becoming a place for the glory of God!”Witnessing of candidate Blair Nuyda

Blair Nuyda is one of our candidates. He is an English Literature teacher and class adviser at Assumption College, San Lorenzo. He is a member of one of the many delegations from the Philippines going on pilgrimage to France and Italy, tracing the footsteps of Mother Marie-Eugénie… and also the discovery of some Assumptionists from all over the world. He visited our community in Paris (Francois Ier) and Bayard publishing house, Ars, Taizé, Lourdes, Sienna, Assisi, Florence and finally Rome. Here is what he writes:

“I had the chance to meet Assumptionists from different provinces all over the world. Coming from a very warm stay at Francois Ier thanks to Fr Jacques Nieuviarts, I went around Paris and went to Rome. I was happy to see Fr Richard Lamoureux and Fr Andre Brombart, whom I met months ago in Manila, in their usual "habitat". I'm also honored to meet other members of the general council despite their busy schedule like Fr Lucas Chuffart, Fr Emmanuel Kahindo, Fr Jean-Daniel Gullung and Julio Navarro. There were representatives from Africa, those who are in Rome to study like Fr Christophe Mbunge and those who are

there to visit. There was Fr Jean Paul Périer-Muzet, whose mixture of brilliance and humor I got to admire; Br Gilles Allard, whom I see working hard with a smile always on his face.

To some extent my little knowledge of French from our recent summer language camp enabled me to engage in little transactions and to understand the conversations at table. During those busy days leading to the canonization, English-speaking Assumptionists sat with us for meals. Fr Marcel Poirier, Fr Thomas O'Brien, Fr Edward Chatov, Fr Marcelo Marciel, Fr Jerome Lively. Fr Donat Lamothe who also came for a visit blessed his icon of Saint Marie Eugenie and Fr Richard Brunelle was kind enough to translate to me the meaning of the icon.

A very memorable encounter in Rome was the chance to meet Vianney Kim Myong Ho, a postulant from Korea who was also having a pilgrimage of Europe. We had a day for ourselves to share stories, eat gelato, tour the Vatican, and visit the tomb of Pope John Paul II. It is wonderful to meet someone who is more or less on the same journey of formation from another country and whom others say looks like me. If ever we both get to persevere, our paths will someday cross again and we will be glad to exchange stories once more.

We all know how the Lord blessed the canonization day with heavy rain. I spent some more days at the General House, getting familiar with its rhythm and getting to know more about Assumptionist history and culture. I guess what came with the blessing of rain for me was the widening of my horizon-my perspective of the congregation has now been made global. I know that a few days after my return to Manila I'll be joining the Adveniat community as a residential candidate. I know that I'll have to concern myself with my immediate community but deep in my heart I know that I have just gotten myself into a family that stretches itself into different cultures, languages and ministries."

The canonization makes the front page of the Manila newspapers
The Filipino press had a large coverage of the canonization. On June 4th, The Philippine Daily Inquirer writes:

"The Presidents of the countries of the three canonized saints (Ireland, Malta and Poland) were present at the ceremony. Although Mother Marie-Eugénie was French, the French government had delegated its Minister of Culture, Christine Albanel. In order to cover up the absence of the President of the French Republic, here is Mrs Arroyo (President of the Philippines), an «old girl» of Assumption and fervent Catholic, and Mrs Marguarita Zavala, First Lady of Mexico, another alumna of Assumption, both in Rome for the canonization."In its June

17th issue, the same newspaper had a full page with 15 pictures of the owner's daughter, Tessa Prieto-Valdes, with the pilgrimage of Assumption alumnae in Rome, under the title: Toasting to a new saint in Rome.Thanksgiving Masses

Thanksgiving Masses and celebrations will be held in each diocese where the Sisters are present. We took part mainly in the celebrations of the great Luzon island where we live.

One was in June 27, at the Cathedral of Antipolo, a famous pilgrimage site honouring Our Lady of Peace and Good Voyage. Nearby, the Sisters run a well- known ecologically-oriented school.

Another was in August 6th, in the Cathedral of Baguio, the "Summer capital of the Philippines". The Sisters there have a Grade school and a retreat house.

On August 25th, a third one was held at the Manila Cathedral. The Sisters run here their famous Assumption College and a mission school in Malibay, where the Little Sisters of the Assumption are also present.

On September 6th, a recent celebration was held at the Cathedral of San Fernando. The Sisters have a technical school in San Simon called Assumpta. After the Mass and buffet, we were fetched to the school for the blessing of a beautiful extension building: library, computer room, classes and auditoriums and an oratory dedicated to Saint Marie-Eugénie.

These Masses were presided by the local bishops including the Cardinal of Manila. In the Manila celebration, for instance, a giant screen showed a video of the miracles performed through the intercession of the saint and a reliquary was brought in procession while the recipients of the Saint's miracles followed. Her "Credo" was put into music by a famous Jesuit composer, Fr. Manoling Francisco. Sr. Marjo's earlier composition, Prayer of MME, was sung after the communion. At the end of the Mass, those people present who had received favors from the saint offered flowers to the icon of the new saint. Heading the procession was the young Rissa Bondoc, the young Filipina whose miraculous healing, eleven years ago, has opened the way to the canonization of Mother Marie-Eugénie of Jesus.

All these events took place during a rainy season quite unusual: very little rain, indeed, but when it did rain, what a disaster: flooding, landslides that hit hard on poor people (400,000 displaced in Manila and four other regions)! Up to now, we did not experience those awful typhoons… But ten of them are expected in the coming weeks. Since the beginning of September, the malls are gradually turning to the Christmas mood…

Press reviewTensed Election Period

The electoral campaign has been violent. With more than 300 people killed during the electoral campaign, the Philippines is now number 100 among the 121 countries considered less peaceful worldwide. The counting of the votes was long and widely disputed.. Numerous international observers mentioned vote buying, intimidations, fraud, filled or stolen ballot boxes… Two months after the election, the results came out. The Opposition won most of the seats at the Senate and a few gubernatorial seats in the Provinces. However the lower house and local government were still dominated by those loyal to the Administration. Will it be strong enough to make proposals that could bring the country forward? Nothing was assured when looking at the first political debates where the fight against poverty and misery was absent…

Fr. Ed Panlilio, first Filipino priest to ever enter politics, has been voted as Governor of Pampanga. Will he be able to bring forth an alternative policy in a region traditionally at the hands of corrupt and jueteng lords?

A military Lieutenant accused of rebellion and is imprisoned has been elected to the Senate. Will he ever be productive in his position?

Now, there are urgent matters to be tackled in the country.

Problems and challenges

Here are some of the problems mentioned in the press.

The challenge of peace in a country at war and victim of a culture of violence

These last months, national and popular newspapers dedicated a number of pages to the

conflict between the army and the extremist group Abu Sayyaf and the armed communist party in the South of the country. In the island of Basilan, ambushes and fights are common, with lots of casualties and horror scenes like the beheading of ten marine soldiers.

During the electoral campaign, the news columns were reporting regularly on the kidnapping of leftists, the killings of farmer union representatives or journalists, bombing in bus terminals, but also villainous crimes of all sorts.

The kidnapping of an Italian missionary, Fr. Giancarlo Bossi, making the front page of the national press was one of the long list of kidnappings, which has become a lucrative enterprise.

A judicial summit with experts coming from all fields of professions was called by the Supreme Court and requested the President to have these extra-judicial killings stopped and have a new legislation passed giving more means to the legislators to sue the suspected State agents or civilians involved in these killings. On the other hand, the President would want a national security legislation be passed. This law will hopefully outlaw the Communist Party and its armed wing as well as the New People's Army (NPA) with the promise of a general amnesty for those who would abandon their weapons, will also come after those who would not abide mercilessly. In the meantime, more leaders are executed violently…

The challenge of development in justice

According to the latest report from the Asian Development Bank, the gap between rich and poor in the Philippines is growing wider, next to Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Laos, Nepal and Sri Lanka.

In its report on the climate of investments in the country, the US State Department stresses the lowering of English proficiency (dangerous for employment and investments), high level of corruption, the slow pace of judicial reforms, low level of protection of intellectual rights, low privatization of energy related activities, need of fiscal reforms to allow massive investments in infrastructures and social services, political instability, heavy bureaucracy in solving litigations and the high price of energy in comparison to the neighbouring countries.

After 6 years, 4 months and 17 days, the verdict came out, at last, for Joseph Estrada, former

President of the Republic, under home arrest since 2004. He was accused of misappropriating 4 B. pesos in illegal games profits and tobacco taxes. Co-accused are his own son, a senator, and his lawyer but they were not convicted. Since these results came out, many more cases of corruption, known by all yet never investigated, have surfaced in the newspapers.

The Conference of Catholic Bishops in the Philippines recently condemned the commutation of two life sentences to 16 years of prison for the rape of an eleven year old child by a former member of congress close to the administration and generous contributor (2 M. Pesos) for the election of the President and her political party…

The challenge of health

One child out of four, between 6 and 10, is underweight in comparison to the normal and one out of three is smaller than average due to a lack of vegetables and fruits, too expensive to buy for their parents.

Access to drinking water remains an important issue.

Cases of Hepatitis B are on the rise in the country and constitute a major concern for public health.

The demographic challenge

The Philippines has the highest birth rate in Asia: 2.1 births per mother. The total population of the country could rise to 142 millions by 2042 (against 88 millions now).

The Catholic Church has some difficulty presenting her message at the service of life and adjust to a genuine pastoral care: the debate is only starting.

The challenge of education

Last June, the opening of the school year was difficult. In order to cover up the lack of teachers and available classrooms, the government instituted a rotation schedule: some children go to school in the morning, the others in the afternoon.

The level of education is lowering, so is proficiency in English, a usual advantage when looking for a job. Fewer students succeed their final exams.

According to the figures of the Department of Education, 6 out of 10 students entering school will complete their Grade school, 4 will enter High school and only 2 College. Worse, it is not assured that these two will ever graduate or will find a job. More than three quarters of poor families children do not make it through Grade school.

An official reports states that 75% of school books are filled with mistakes, without penalty for their authors. 400 mistakes were found in one single book…

The government invests little money in Education and the salary of teachers is very low. More than 3,000 English teachers have chosen to teach in Thailand where their monthly pay will be between 17,000 and 43,000 php (340 and 860 US $) instead of a range of 8,000 to 10,000 php in the Philippines.

Good news.
* The Government has announced an increase of 7,5% net growth for the second trimester of the year, the highest in decades, and an unemployment rate of only 7,4% in April (against 8,2% last year).

The Filipino Overseas Workers remittances have increased by 26% during the first trimester of 2007, compared to last year figures, and foreign investments are on the rise by 127% in electronic materials.

But these successes do not reach to the majority of poor people who live in very difficult conditions.

* More tourists are coming to the country, allowing new investments. According to the 2006 available figures, the highest number of tourists per country are: South Korea (462,889), Japan

(275,330), North America (265,716), Taiwan 82,113) and China (61,206). The Philippines is becoming a tourist destination for Europeans with health conditions and senior clients.

* NGOs and Church organizations are active, particularly in helping street children and other social programs like housing projects. Celebrating his 75th birthday, Cardinal Gaudencio Rosales declared that day «a poor people's day»: rather than offering him gifts for his birthday. He asked each Catholic to take part in a day of friendship with poor people around and secure food for the poor children, and to participate in social activities in their neighbourhood.

One of his many initiatives, «Pondo ng Pinoy» is to ask every practicing Catholic, rich or poor, an offering of 25 centavos a day (the smallest Filipino coin) in order to create of foundation for a housing project for poor families. It's working! More than 30 houses have been built for the year 2006 and around 40 this year.

* Three Filipinas were the first Southeast Asian women to ever conquer Mount Everest. September 21, 2007

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After the retreats, the whole community got together for common holidays in Bohol, a small island in the middle part of the country. In Panglao, our usual program dealt with rest, discoveries, sharing in formal or informal meetings and common prayer. At eight in the morning, we came together for prayer and breakfast; the rest of the morning was free for swimming, walking around, surfing the net or reading. At noon, we would prepare a simple lunch then have a siesta and enjoy the rest of the afternoon according to each one's favorite activity. By late afternoon, we would get together again for a time of sharing, the Eucharist and a dinner on the beach: one will just have to choose the preferred fish, seafood and vegetables to eat and the restaurant would cook them! We would then close the day with a card game or a stroll on the beach.