Chronicles of a Foundation no. 2

The first two months, besides the setting of the community life and the installation in our house, have introduced us somewhat dramatically to the history and the culture of the country that is becoming ours. Since we arrived, indeed, we have been faced with three dramas that struck the Filipino people one after the other.

Three dramas

Early February 79 people mainly women and children were trampled over at the entrance of one of the biggest stadiums in Manila. A famous TV game show was celebrating its anniversary, with gigantic gifts and lotteries, feeding up the most foolish dreams. A rumor from the crowd bursts out: “There’s a bomb!” Instant panic… A dramatic parable of poor people longing to get out of their misery at all cost while political promises of more than twenty years remain vain…

On February 17, world networks have shown footages of the landslide and mud flow in Leyte, in the South, covering a whole village and its school. For sure, the rain was particularly heavy for that time of the year, yet the catastrophe was foreseeable… The country was soon mobilized, the army, the Church, the NGOs. The international aid came quickly specially from the Asian countries. Religious men and women sent in volunteers to help rebuild the houses and the school… A parable of the difficulty to legislate properly on a housing policy and on the preservation of the land.. Coming back from Baguio, in the North of the country, we have noticed the threat of wild deforestation… while the pressure of the demography remains high and at a time when the Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) invest their future in homes and land…

Just a week after, on February 24, on the twentieth anniversary of the mythical People Power revolution (EDSA), which overthrew the dictator Ferdinand Marcos, the ruling President, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, declared a state of emergency. A tactical alliance between young army officers, the communist party, the far right, with the support of former Presidents of the Republic (!), tried to stage a coup against the President using the enthusiasm of the popular marches celebrating the anniversary. But the crowd resisted these leaders… and the situation remained quiet, particularly in the provinces.

That same evening, we were on the campus of the Jesuits' Ateneo de Manila University. At the Mass, the Provincial of the Jesuits, surrounded by the presidents of the Manila and Zamboaga (Mindanao) universities and friends, gave a powerful homily stressing "points of discernment" on the on-going events. In their Lenten message, the bishops pointed out that one should not be mistaken about the real emergency that the country is facing - the social cancer of poverty, alluding to the lack of credible leaders for the people who has grown uninterested with political maneuvers. "They seek their own interests", people say. Some T-shirts read: *I don't cheat because I can't cheat as good as my government*
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As foreigners, we had some difficulty to understand the whole affair but we felt that politics of opportunism and corruption have been defeated. The people are fed up with politicians who show up to them only for their votes and do nothing for them between elections. In this regard, a huge enterprise of formation has yet to come…

Joyful events

With the whole Church and the people of the Philippines we have learned with great joy the nomination of Archbishop Gaudencio Rosales as Cardinal of the Church. He has a much different charisma from that of his predecessor as Archbishop of Manila, Cardinal Jaime Sin; he is close to the poor, he is their voice. In his last public speech to governmental leaders of the housing and building office and some NGOs representatives before leaving for Rome for the Cardinals' Consistory, Cardinal Rosales came out with a vibrant plea in favor of the poor, denouncing their housing conditions and meager education facilities, specially in Manila where a master plan of relocation is on the go: *"The government must put the poor at the center of its planning. It must give them priority… It is not right to put a poor family on the street. Please, adapt your plans to the ways of the poor. Make the poor the prime beneficiaries of your work and your first concern!"* *When we were received in his office, in January 2005, while we were talking about our future pastoral priorities, he told us: "Come and see… have a look at the needs of the Church and the people of the Philippines. They are numerous. Answer them with your own charism". And he added with gentleness, almost apologizing: "If one of your communities could settle among the poor, I would be very thankful, because the Church is not present enough among them". And he continued: "Despite our great needs, in clear we do not need new religious congregations, yet the Pope has given us the responsibility of the evangelization of China…". And since, he has identified "the evangelization of Asia as the challenge of our times".*

Thus goes our life

We have not been mere spectators to these events. Activities and discoveries have been numerous these past weeks. Thus, we went and met the candidates to our community life that had been contacted over the years by members of the North American Province or the Religious of the Assumption in the Philippines. Gilles Blouin and Clemente Boleche were sent to Cagayan de Oro (Mindanao), and Bernard Holzer and Alex Castro to Iloilo (Visayas), while Jean-Marie Chuvi was keeping the house and entertaining his network of African friends.

As it is, four aspirants will join the community in June and October. The Manila candidates, busy with their final exams, will come and visit in the coming days; then, the composition of the community for the new school year (in June) will be more definite. We will meet once more the different young people in contact with us for vocation weekend retreats at the end of May.

These last weeks, we were busy meeting with religious men and women in order to know more about the country, the Church, their needs, religious life here and programs of formation. The Jesuits have two communities on our street, the Provincial house and the pre-noviciate community. Across the main avenue, we are right in the middle of their university campus, the Ateneo. Thus, we have been invited to two open-house evenings: one at the pre-noviciate (18 postulants) and the other to the international residence on campus (about 50 Jesuits in formation coming from Vietnam, China, Myanmar, East Timor, Indonesia). Once a week these two communities welcome guests and propose to some young men to come and meet with them: they first get together for a well planned liturgy, share a simple meal and listen to a presentation. In their retreat house, 50 meters at the back of our house, the Cenacle Sisters offer a series of religious culture sessions and initiation to consecrated life. This will be available to our candidates… and the older religious as well. Still in our neighbourhood, the Passionists and the Camillians have their houses of formation for theology students. Through them we also had some interesting contacts as well as with the Association of Major Religious Superiors in the Philippines (AMRSP).

In March, we had more than one opportunity to foster and deepen our links with our sisters, the Religious of the Assumption. We presided the closing Mass of their Provincial Chapter in Antipolo. We were treated with free access to the swimming pool of the college, which we enjoyed a lot. Jean-Marie was introduced to swimming… most needed in a country made out of more than 7,000 islands.

For the anticipated feast of Marie-Eugénie de Jésus, the whole community went to San Simon, an Assumption school in a rural area, an hour away North of Manila. Two hours of confession for the students, a festive Eucharist, distribution of awards for distinguished students, a typical meal and lots of discussion…. We ordered some pieces of furniture from the school carpentry, their self-financing initiative. We took the opportunity to visit Alex Castro`s family, his mother`s house, his native parish.

On the feast day itself, the whole community went to Assumption College, San Lorenzo. The three priests took turns in presiding Masses for the grade school, the high school, and the college staff members. In late afternoon, we concelebrated the Eucharist with Most Rev. Teodoro Bacani, an Auxiliary bishop in Manila, honoring the alumnae jubilarians. The evening started with a buffet served in the courtyard of the college, followed by a musical “3,999”, tracing back the strong friendship between Sister Marie-Eugénie and Father d’Alzon (3,999 refers to the impressive number of letters that the two Founders exchanged). People get to know that the male branch of the Assumption family has arrived to the Philippines!

These fraternal contacts continued to deepen as we took our community holidays in Baguio, the “Summer Capital of the Philippines”. It is a six-hour bus ride North of Manila, way up in the mountains (a climate compared to the one of Kyondo) where the Religious of the Assumption have a grade school, a retreat center… and a beautiful small cottage. We celebrated together the feast of Saint Joseph. The whole week was a time for resting, meeting, sharing, walking, shopping -- another national sport along with ‘texting’ (see Chronicles of a Foundation no. 1) – enjoyable games of Uno (a very funny card game), and also a time for praying…

Our life is not only into feasts… The installation of the community continued with the closing of our local chapter, the study of our accounts, the long waited coming of our boxes from Boston, visit of some young people, friends, European and African volunteers involved with street kids. We are establishing links with our parish, Our Lady of Pentecost, erected in 1999, with a totally new church at 100 meters from our house. We are working on our formation programs, the library is set in our community room, and so are the computers… as we wait for our Internet connection. When? Surely PLDT’s motto is not “Thy Kingdom Come”. The brothers are busy with their registration at the university. We begin to discover the Filipino red tape with its numerous “requirements”… We continue the daily shopping, cooking, cleaning; we discovered and tasted local dishes and even Jean-Marie Chuvi who had never cooked before, now discovers his hidden talents; but where are the live chickens and goats? We will find some, even in our neighborhood! But let`s wait until Easter.

We know by now that the house that we are renting for one year is located on a very busy

street, which is also noisy and polluted. So, we are scouting for another house, or even an empty lot to build anew. Thus we discovered our neighborhood in another way, its people, its local leaders and ways to go about here: as an example, real estate cost is based per square meter… and the house is given free, whether in good or bad condition ! We are working on a few alternatives to present to the Council of the Congregation.

Lent has started for us also, but with 35 degrees Celsius at the start of the warmer season. No problem, the heat is much bearable than the noise and the pollution. Still difficult to imagine the Holy Week in the heat and during the summer holidays!

Before the Holy week starts, we will begin a two week summer course prepared for brothers of different cultures living in community and we look forward to an immersion program among the poorest in Manila. You will read about it all in the next Chronicles of a foundation. Until then…