CHRONICLES OF A FOUNDATION no. 3

Manila (Philippines), April 2006Seminar on valuing cultural diversity and conflict resolutionLent, here, coincides with the summer holidays and the school year recess. For two weeks, every morning, the whole community followed a seminar on valuing cultural diversities and conflict resolution. We were a group of 23 religious, men and women, coming from all continents, mainly from Asia and the Pacific: China, Vietnam, Myanmar (alias Burma), Philippines, South Korea, Australia, Papua-New Guinea, Micronesia… Among other questions: How do you integrate in a new culture without loosing your own identity, listening without judging; trying to fully understand the other before coming across in conflict. There is a lot of progress to be done here for each one of us… But living this together should help us to grow in our understanding of culture shock and to turn to common sets of references in solving possible difficulties ahead. We gave some time for an evaluation of the seminar afterwards and have decided to invite at our table Fr. Edgar Javier (SVD), the facilitator, in order to deepen one question or another.

Holy WeekAs a community, we decided to live the numerous celebrations in our own parish and learn more about the faith and traditions of the people without judging, like we were taught during the seminar on dialogue and cultures.

Palm Sunday

At 7h30, on Sunday morning, we walk up the street of our *barangay* (neighbourhood) for the Palm Sunday procession. We get ourselves some
palaspas
or young coconut tree leaves nicely weaved in all kinds of shapes. Along the streets, angels - young girls dressed in white with wings hanging from their back - throwing rose petals on the way and singing `hosanna`, like those children welcoming Jesus at the Holy City gates for his solemn entrance. Few men in the procession, except the «officials»… but as we get to the church, we find it full of people, up to the balconies…

From Monday to Wednesday

On Monday night, we can hear some kind of a chant or *pabasa* coming up from the neighbourhood. A family has taken up the centuries long tradition of singing the life of Jesus through his Passion; another one has on an original version of the Bible stories from Genesis to the Book of Revelation in prose form. It goes on day in day out.

Progressively, all through the week, everything will close down. Be assured that from Holy Thursday to Easter Sunday, even the subway will be at complete rest.

All the TV channels will compete in presenting Jesus stories or staging religious events. We watched a live coverage of a huge charismatic gathering led by a Franciscan in a coliseum of a well-known mall.

The Philippines Star (one of the leading nation wide newspapers) had its front page notice: “In observance of Lent, The Star will have no issues on Good Friday and Black Saturday. Publication resumes on Easter Sunday”.

The newspapers report on the spiritual retreat of the President of the Republic with some members of her cabinet at the presidential mansion in Baguio. In her Lenten Message, she calls on the nation to more unity and harmony “in accordance with the will of the Lord” and she announces in her Easter greetings to the nation that from then on prisoners on death row would not be executed and that capital punishment would be commuted to life sentences.

Our mayor of Quezon City goes public also with his Easter greetings, wishing happy holidays to his employees and recommending setting time apart for Holy Week celebrations and church visits or *Visita Iglesia*.

It is also the time for confessions. We help the parish priest and, by the same token, have an opportunity to come closer to the core of the life of the parishioners. We, priests, are impressed by the preparation of these confessions, filled with real life and often many sufferings.

Holy Thursday

Early morning, we leave for the Cathedral of Cubao in time for Morning Prayer and the Chrism Mass. The statues are covered with purple cloth. A video welcomes the delegations from the various parishes of the diocese. The birds fly joyfully over our heads. Around 200 priests concelebrate with the bishop. Only 38 of them are from the diocesan clergy. Religious are a large majority in this diocese. There is high emotion in the church as the clergy renew their priestly vows and when the bishop asks the people to pray for their priests and for him too. At the end of the Mass, there is the official announcement of the new Vicars Forane; they will be greeted soon after, on the porch of the church, with colourful banners and noisy bands.

In the taxi driving us back home - all public transports are closed - we can hear on the radio prayers and hymns. At noontime, in honour of the institution of the priesthood, Father Jean-Marie Chuvi treats us with a delicious turkey; he had been up until the middle of the night to make sure that it would be golden and crusty.

At 5h00 pm, we reach the parish for the Last Supper liturgy. The church is packed. After the Mass, a surprising movement of people gets going: hundreds of people move around silently, some to the confessionals, some others to the Stations of the Cross, most of the time in families, while some others go to the improvised altar of repose on a well decorated patio adjacent to the church. This continuous dance like movement is truly impressive.

Good Friday in Pampanga

At around 10h00 am, we arrive at the Cathedral of Pampanga , an hour long drive from home, north of Manila. Men self-flagellating, their backs with blood, others carrying a cross bare foot, all these people meet in front of the Cathedral. They are dozens parading up the streets and splashing around their blood (their whips are made out of ropes ending with wooden blades). The spectacle is unbearable. The flagellants walk bare foot on a torrid concrete road, no T-shirts but head covered with a black cloth and crowned with some local weeds. Many have large tattoos. Their jeans are stained with blood; it spurts on the nearby cars. The crowd - made out of children, young people and few foreigners - watches, walks along, takes pictures… Sometimes, the flagellants would lie on the road, blocking the traffic, and would have children beat them with their whip… and all of this in the midst of stands of vendors of cold drinks, food, and souvenirs…

We make our way through the beggars, the cripples of all kinds and those who are having their picnic, just like people watching the *Tour de France…*But policemen and the army are

everywhere present, checking bags and discretely keeping an eye on things so that the situation remain under control... When approaching the site of the crucifixions, nearby a squatter's zone, we discover a mound slightly higher than the ground where three crosses are placed standing. TV crews of the international media are standing still, waiting on a special stage just for them. There is also a VIP platform (the only sitting space provided) for officials and local politicians who publicize their presence by sponsoring shades and tents. It is quite hot by now. Vendors are doing good business, it seems: bottled water, cold drinks, ice cream, large hats, umbrellas, you name it…

At noontime, the first flagellants arrive on the site. They kneel in front of the three crosses, or lie down prostrated, make a silent prayer then take off the black cloth from their head. The crowd is pressing closer to the crucifixion area. Hundreds of umbrellas of all colors block the view.

It is twelve thirty; the roman soldiers wrapped in their bright red capes climb up-stage, some on foot and some on their horses. A few show operators, dressed in yellow shirts, jeans and baseball caps, cigarettes at their lips, seem to manage the movement of everyone... Here come the pious women. One of them, an American or European, holds a portable video camera and will take close shots. A few flagellants pass through the crowd, which opens up at their sight. Fearing of getting stained by the blood.

At one o'clock sharp, the first three volunteers are nailed on the crosses; the show is not as unbearable as that of the flagellants. They stay a few minutes on the cross then they are brought down before being replaced by another set of volunteers. But we leave the place immediately… The spectacle will go on until three, the hour that Jesus died. We are told that there are thirty-six on the row, this year. We feel somewhat awkward to be part of the crowd… like those surrounding the Golgotha, I suppose.

The Seven Last Words

We are driven to the Holy Family Parish, in Apalit. It is 1h30 pm and the church is packed. Seven lay people share reflection and meditation on the seven last words of Jesus before dying on the cross. Our own Brother Alex has been asked to present the last meditation: it will be a vibrant half hour long preaching.

The Passion of the Christ liturgy

It is 3h30 pm and the fans in the church are not doing their job anymore. It is the beginning of the Good Friday liturgy. The *retablo* is covered with a plywood wall; sitting in front of it are twelve men wearing each a banner with the name of an apostle. The narrator starts the long reading of the Passion in the Gospel of John, which is followed by the procession for the veneration of the cross. According to the tradition here, the last few meters are walked up kneeling. Everybody comes and venerates the cross of Jesus… The ceremony lasts a couple of hours.

The procession to the cemetery

After the liturgy, we have a few minutes to talk with the parish priest. We ask him about the flagellants. He replies that this is a very ancient tradition and that it is hard to oppose it. Often enough, people will be flagellants for nine years before turning the role to another member of the family. The priest asks them to come to confession before proceeding… But it is time already to join the procession that will bring Christ from his cross to the cemetery.

It is around six o'clock and the sun sets on the rice fields, brightly red tonight. More than a thousand people will leave in procession from the barrio of Telacsan. The priest walks behind a funeral car - a new Mercedes, that is - in which a statue of a lying Christ has been placed. Then come the twelve apostles, the Knights of Columbus in full costumes (capes, shiny swords and feather hats), the various parish organizations and seven lighted fully decorated carriages: Christ stripped of his garments, Christ beaten, Christ insulted, Veronica, Mary Magdalene, Mater Dolorosa, the Pieta… We are walking at the end of the procession and, for sure, Jean-Marie Chuvi is the attraction, maybe the first Black man to walk down the street of the village. Along the road, people have crowded in front of their homes; some utter a prayer, others sign themselves as we pass. It is 7h30 pm and we are not half way to the cemetery. We leave the procession and take a car to the cemetery in order to see the tent where the body of Christ will be laid.

These Good Friday celebrations are quite a shock to us. Friends will tell us that the people here live more deeply Good Friday, identifying easily with the sufferings of Jesus of Nazareth, than to his resurrection whose effects are hard to discover. One of the latest books published by Bayard can help one enter into this religious culture - while waiting to meet Filipino theologians to discuss this. The author is Virgilio Elizondo, an American theologian, son of a Mexican immigrant; his book is entitled: A God of incredible surprises: Jesus of Nazareth. Here is an interesting quotation:

“In our mixed race South American culture, it is not so much the disincarnated images of the Risen Lord nor his Christological titles that speak to the people, but rather the so human face of Jesus of Nazareth, whether as a child, a young boy or, most importantly, as the suffering man. His divinity is never as blatant as during the popular rites of the Good Friday celebrations” (p. 30).

“All the Easter celebrations are so weak in comparison to those of Viernes santo. Many see our Mexican celebrations as macabre. Some even think that they are the lot of sick people who lead to the veneration of cruelty and blood shedding. But for the poor and those who suffer in this world, for the silent victims of the cruel system in which we live, for the crucified people of our modern day life, it is the most beautiful day of the ultimate triumph of God’s love over the forces of evil” (p. 157).

Saturday of the Holy Week

It surely takes the whole Saturday morning to recover from the hardship of yesterday. At 9h00 pm, we go to our parish for the celebration of the Easter Vigil which will integrate elements of popular tradition. With the parish priest, a newly ordained Filipino Jesuit and a Polish priest, we enter the church without procession and listen, in the dark, to the seven readings of the Old and the New Testaments, which precede the proclamation of the resurrection of Christ. Slides are shown during the readings in order to keep our attention, often background music also. The liturgy continues in the sanctuary with the blessing of the fire and the preparation of the paschal candle, accompanied by traditional chant. The new fire is distributed to the twelve apostles who in turn pass it around inside the church. Then the Gospel of the resurrection of Jesus is proclaimed. While the Alleluia is sung, a group of men carry, from the back of the church, the statue of the Risen Lord coming to meet his Mother, a Virgin Mary dressed in dark velvet, according to the Spanish tradition, her head covered with a black mourning veil. From above, the veil is lifted up, uncovering the beautiful face of Mary, while rose petals are thrown over her from the balcony. This is a very ancient popular tradition that would not accept that Jesus appears to his disciples without first appearing to his Mother…. A procession with the statue of the Risen Lord is organized through the crowd: Christ comes to meet everyone…

The liturgy continues with a young woman performing a beautiful dance around the paschal candle, the choir singing a solemn Gloria (with the return of the bells!) and the angels offering a dance (just remember these children along the streets on Palm Sunday). After the homily, the priest presides over the blessing of the holy water, the sprinkling of the faithful and the renewal of the baptismal vows. “Now, the Mass continues as usual”, Father Steve whispers towards us. It is 10h30 pm.

Easter Sunday and Easter Monday

This is time to rush to the beaches and picnic or to invade the malls since business can resume after such a long recess. During these two days, we received the Little Sisters of the Assumption as well as some friends. We took the opportunity to share what we have lived during this Holy Week and to hear about what is happening in the poor neighbourhood where they work and about their discovery of the Filipino people. We scheduled our next visit to them. In the meantime, we also have our Easter ritual: on Tuesday of the Easter week, we set out for a day at the beach in Batangas, South of Manila. The water is crystal clear, with exotic colourful fishes, delicious fresh fish as a picnic… Father Chuvi, although not swimming yet, is making progress on the water…

And the weeks to come

On Thursday of Easter week, Brother Alex Castro will start his summer courses; that will bring him to conclude an MA in Religious Education. Father Bernard Holzer will be travelling to Amsterdam for the Council of the Congregation where he is invited to present our new foundation and our future projects. He will also be visiting a number of communities of the Northern Europe Province and in France.

This coming week end, the other members of the community will travel to Mindanao (an island in the South): Father Gilles for a seminar for Vocation Directors, Brother Clem and Father Chuvi for a Justice and Peace workshop… We will tell you more about it in the next Chronicle of a foundation …

Short facts of life in the Philippines

- You are on a long distance bus ride; a video film is shown on the screen. It is 3h00 pm, time for a pause in the movie for a prayer at the hour of Christ death…

- You are at the cinema. After the commercials and the previews of the next attractions, the lights come back and the national anthem is sung: everybody stands, right hand on the heart.

- When visiting families, all the family members gather around you and ask you to bless them.

- In many parishes, at the offertory procession, it is a whole family that comes to present the offerings to the priest who will bless its members. At the moment of the kiss of peace, children and grand children come and kiss the parents and the elders.

- Summer is here and so is the heat (it is now 36 Celsius); yet we live spring and fall year around. Every morning, one has to sweep the leaves that have fallen, as new leaves appear everyday.

- The rooster of our neighbour did die in the cockpit. Nothing is said officially… The fact is that there is a new one singing now, younger and more colourful. A young man takes care of it every day, with numerous loving strokes and mysterious whispering… but it continues to wake us up early enough… And we are still waiting for an invitation to our first cockfight…

Last piece of newsAt last, just before the Holy Week, the PLTD has connected us with the phone and the Internet. We suddenly have become more efficient. We are still looking for a less expensive international call system…

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