July 25 2006: six months in the Philippines

Papers in order

On the eve of Independence Day, on June 12, Frs. Bernard Holzer, Gilles Blouin and Jean-Marie Chuvi finally obtained - with the tremendous help of the Episcopal Conference staff and Sister Margarita RA - our long waited for *missionary visa* for one year. But our invitation to attend our first cock fight drop dead again: we had to rely on a TV presentation of the same, without the ambiance and the passion of the crowd…

Academic year grand opening

Tagalog classes

Frs. Gilles Blouin, Jean-Marie Chuvi and Bernard Holzer are back on the school benches: they are being introduced to Tagalog, one of the two official languages of the Philippines (along with English). From Monday to Friday, they have four hours of classes in the morning, at a language center designed for missionaries and business men. They are learning about the subtleties and mechanics of that language. Their four teachers manage to give them also some basic traits of the Filipino culture.

The center, a Baptist Church compound, offers English, Tagalog and Cebuano (the dialect spoken on the island of Cebu). A Congolese missionary just graduated from a six month course in English; he is off to Japan where he will start courses in Japanese! Many Koreans come to the Philippines in order to learn English. For our Tagalog class we are in a good group: an Indonesian missionary, an Ecuadorian sister of Mercy (who first had to learn English), a Japanese couple working at the Embassy, an American business man. There are also three Chinese aspirants for the Salvatorians who are learning English before starting their formation in the Philippines.

Little by little, the mechanic of the language sinks in: our dearest Fathers risk themselves in short sentences or dare some simple questions to the teachers, although it is still difficult to get their eyes from the book…

What a surprise to discover that in Tagalog one cannot count on *have* or *be* auxiliaries. But many very short affixes can be used in one single sentence and alter significantly the meaning of what you say. As a foreigner, one panics at hearing three of four of these in a row, often faster than one can grasp. Well, let us call it a mental gymnastic…

As an example, *ba* is the affix for an interrogation, *sa* indicates the future or even the location, *n a*
signifies the present moment,
rin
or
din:
thus,
lang
only,
raw
or
daw
, they say… Each of these finds its place in a given sentence following a secret logic, a real puzzle for a beginner. Actually, the verbs will bring greater difficulties. And don't dare expect some similarity with European languages… Well, try this one:
panamampalataya,
it simply means faith!

The alphabet is missing a few known letters: ABKDE

GHILM

NNgOPR

STUWY

Have a first lesson: Kumusta kayo? How are you? Mabuti po naman! Well! At kayo po? And you? And now try this: Totoo rin ba na walang pasok sa private skul at hindi lang raw ang sa public skul? Is it true that there is no class at the private school and not only at the public

school? Few other discoveries

Filipinos love to laugh, to play on words. Thus, often after a question or an assertion, they will add: Just joking!

Instead of saying Good morning!, you will sometime hear: What did you do last night? or Where are you going?, which doesn't imply a straight answer from you. You will say: Just there! and it is alright… or just give a mimic with your lips. They just want to show attention to you.

The Filipino is community minded: he does not say my house but always our house.

Academic year

Brother Alex Castro started his third year in Theology at the University of Santo Tomas University of the Dominicans, the oldest Catholic University in Asia (almost 400 years old). Brother Clem Boleche continues his studies in Theology at the Lazarists Seminary, which is part of Adamson University (16,000 students). At the start of the school year, there is a solemn Mass of the Holy Spirit, with the faculty in colourful gowns; it is a good opportunity for the formators to meet with the teachers.

Four candidates have joined the community for a community experience and a vocation discernment. Joseph (28 years old) was a music teacher at Assumption College, Iloilo, a school run by the Religious of the Assumption. He is now studying Philosophy at the Seminary of the Divine Word Missionaries (Christ the King School of Theology). Greg (26 years old) was a teacher of Philosophy in Cebu. He is now completing an MA in Philosophy with a thesis on The theory of communication of Karl Jaspers; he will start studying Theology in November. Glenn (23 years old) has just graduated from College with a major in Philosophy. He is now having a work experience as a teacher of religion in a working class neighbourhood of Manila (Malibay), in a school run by the Religious of the Assumption. Eugene (21 years old) is with us for four months before going back to Cagayan de Oro in order to complete his College degree in Accounting. While here, he is full time on an immersion program with the Little Sisters of the Assumption, in the working class Malibay area. Very concretely, our collaboration with our sisters is getting deeper.

Monthly get-together

Every month, the community welcomes candidates to religious life from the Manila area; it is an open house for 24 hours (Friday night to Saturday afternoon) for a time of fraternal sharing, prayer and assumptionist formation. It seems to be well appreciated. On the first get-together, Fr. Gilles made a presentation on the life, spirituality and legacy of Father Emmanuel d'Alzon, our founder. The second meeting was with Father Marcel Poirier, our Provincial from North America, who shared his vocation story and the challenges of our Congregation, as he perceives them today.

Stronger ties with Korea

On July 2nd, Brother Joseph Baik Ho made his final vows in Kwangju, South Korea. It was a good opportunity to strengthen our ties with our closest assumptionist community in Asia and our «older sister» community by fifteen years. Father Gilles Blouin represented us at the celebration and spent five days visiting with the brothers there. The ceremony was typically Korean in its design: the language, for sure, but also the numerous friends of the community, young priests who had studied with Joseph at the Seminary, the parish choir fully dressed in the traditional colourful dresses, and the meal served at the end of the Mass to all the guests: the whole thing was at the same time somewhat «official» and yet so historical since Joseph is our first Korean brother. Four candidates residing in the community also had a significant role during the Mass. Particularly moving at the end of the celebration, was the grand prostration of Joseph in front of his parents, a sign of reverence and respect. Then he kissed them warmly under the general applause.

The community has moved recently in a bright new house which can offer space for spiritual retreats. According to the local custom, you are invited to sleep right on the floor: not easy for the first nights! The same in the chapel: no chairs but rather a praying cushion… Welcome to deep Asia! But what is this when you value strong ties between our communities in Asia!

A Provincial visitation

From July 5th to the 15th, the community was happy to receive Father Marcel Poirier, its Provincial Superior. It was his first visit to the Philippines.

A heavy program was waiting for him: visit of many properties, meetings with the Religious of the Assumption and the Little Sisters, with Faculty deans, with Superiors of various Congregations, with the individual religious of our community and also with our candidates in Manila and in Cagayan de Oro in Mindanao (an hour and a half away by plane). Add to this a first encounter with a typhoon and a visit to the Mall of Asia, the biggest mall of the whole of Asia, built on an immense reclaimed area. The owner even built a Spanish baroque style church in the vicinity of the mall and gave it to the archdiocese; it has become a five-star wedding church.

On July 12th, during Father Marcel's last Eucharist with the community, he had some recommendations and words of encouragement to the formators, the student brothers and the candidates:

"Bernard, Gilles and Chuvi (…) you are trying to adapt yourselves to this country, to this culture, to this Church. You are having contacts with many persons and groups, in order to be open to new realities. That is the right attitude. (…) I greatly support your efforts and encourage you to learn the language of the country, in spite of the fact that the official language in the house is English and should remain so, if we want this community to welcome brothers from other parts of Asia. Through the language you will get a better grasp of the culture and, even if you don't speak it well, people will interpret your efforts as a sign of love for their culture, a sign of love for what they are.

Clem and Alex are in a sort of "in between" situation. Their own formation is on the way and yet they will help in welcoming candidates. So will Ricky and Ed when they arrive. Their presence is a blessing, since it will facilitate a better understanding of the Filipino culture. With their experience of religious life, however limited, they will help to identify the ways of incarnating the Assumptionist charism here.

In a few months, the community will probably move to another house. The neighbourhood is not poor and our house will not be. We do move for practical reasons, because we know that to reflect and pray there is a need for silence and quiet. We also know that living in nice settings can also lead to the hardening of the heart and eventually draw us to forget the condition of the poor. There are many poor, even some at the corner of our street. It would be a disgrace if settings more conducive to prayer made us deaf to the cries of the poor. It is a preoccupation that Bernard will often share with you.

Our presence here is not just a stepping stone to reach China or some other parts of Asia. Our presence here has a value in itself, that is why Bernard and the others are making great efforts to insert Assumption in the Philippine culture. However, we wish and pray that our roots in the Philippines will develop the same missionary zeal and also be preoccupied with the proclamation of the Good News in the rest of the world. That is also part of the Assumptionist charisma: to really identify with the people to whom they go and to sow the missionary seed in their hearts, exactly the same way the apostles did at the beginning of the Church."

* Brother Ricky Montanez is the first Filipino to become an Assumptionist. He started his studies in Theology in the USA and is now completing a pastoral training in Colombia. He is appointed to the community of Manila for the feast of the Assumption and he will continue his studies here. Brother Ed Molina is about to finish his novitiate year in the USA. A mature man in his early forties, with an experience in formation, he will start his studies in Theology upon his arrival to Manila next September.

Meeting of the Major Superiors of the Philippines

From July 17 to 20, Fr. Bernard took part in the meeting of the Major Superiors of the Philippines in Cebu. Forty-eight religious men in charge of Provinces, Regions or local communities were present. This was the first official event of the Assumptionists as a new religious Congregation of men in the Philippines, the 98th!

The theme: Prophetic Witness, Reflecting the Mission and Option for the Poor was developed through lectures, witnesses and sharing. There was plenty of free time so that participants could meet and talk.

For Bernard, it was a good opportunity to get much information about the situation in the Philippines and to meet with people with a long experience in the country as well as with partners of the Conference of the Major Superiors in the Philippines: Justice and Peace, Urban Missionaries Foundation, Rural Missionaries, Prison Ministries. It was also like a spiritual retreat with in-depth inputs and common prayer. He was happy to meet again Cardinal Ricardo Vidal (Archbishop of Cebu) who had been a guest in France of the CCFD (Comité Catholique contre la Faim et pour le Développement).

"We have spent time in reflecting on the conditions of the people that we serve and we are compelled to address the following concerns that plague our society today: the increasing number of extra-judicial killings, the ill effects of mining and its control by foreign corporations, charter change process, rampant corruption in both public and private sectors, and the

immediate and dire consequences of poverty throughout the country." Final Statement of the Majors Superiors of the Philippines

Inculturation

First typhoons

On July 24th, we are having typhoon number seven: Glenda. During the rainy season, you can count up to twenty of them! Lots of rain and terrible storms. Better not be out door then… There are also strong winds. Typhoon number six, Florita, caused a number of deaths in Baguio due to a landslide; there were also floods in Manila. Previous typhoons were baptized Agaton, Basyang, Caloy, Domeng, Ester.

Early morning, people watch TV to check the strength of the storm and to know if there will be class that day, if it is safe to go out. It is good luck for community life: everybody stays home and enjoys each others company… The worse typhoons are yet to come; they will tear off roofs, carry away cars, and uproot trees. Promise: we will stay home!

Celebrations

- Every Sunday, the community goes to Mass in a different parish in the area: one Sunday, it was at the University of the Philippines parish, the next at Our Lady of La Strada, at the Carmelites or at the Ateneo. We experience different expressions of the faith of the Church. At the end of the Mass at La Strada, the priest invited the faithful to pray for fight of a famous Filipino boxer against a Mexican opponent! Dear God, to you the choice of the winner!

- On June 18th, the whole family of the Assumption (Religious, Little Sisters and Assumptionist) was gathered at San Lorenzo for the final vows of Sister Sylvia. Our Manila candidates were also present.

- The community continues to welcome friends of our candidates or family members.

- On July 1st, the community was out to see The return of Superman as a fund raising show for the 20th anniversary of the AMA, the NGO of the volunteers of the Religious of the Assumption.

- On June 28th, we celebrated in a festive way the 60th birthday of Fr. Gilles (with a French dinner prepared by Bernard toppled by crepes with maple syrup); on July 9th, it was Joseph's 28th birthday and on the 12th, Fr. Bernard's 58th. They all come together, don't they?

- Two members of the community have been faithful in following the last showings of the World Cup of Football. They were up by 2:30 am and were walking across the boulevard to the gymnasium of the Ateneo where the series could be watched live on a large screen. For the Brazil-France grand final, they were more than 500 supporters (evenly divided?)!

- On July 23rd, we were invited to the installation of our new parish priest of Our Lady of Pentecost, Father ¨Bong¨.

Formation for formators

At the end of July, Frs. Bernard and Gilles started a formation for formators in a group of nineteen religious men and women (29 to 72 years old!), in charge of formation in their respective Congregations. Four religious men: Scalabrini (Mexican from Puebla), Servant of the Divine Providence (Filipino) and the two Assumptionists you know. Among the fifteen religious women, there are two from Myanmar (ex-Burma), two from Vietnam, two from East Timor and nine from the Philippines. The formation is designed like an experience of spiritual accompaniment. It is held the whole day Friday and Saturday for three months.

From now on, their agenda is booked: from Monday to Wednesday it is Tagalog classes in the morning; on Friday and Saturday, it is the formation for formators. They can rely on Thursday and Sunday to do the rest of their work…

Last minute news

The Provincial of North America with the consent of his Council authorises the community of Manila to conclude the purchase of a property with an ample house to be renovated.