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The Beginnings of the Salesian Presence in East Asia

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THE DAUGHTERS OF MARY HELP OF CHRISTIANS IN THE PHILIPPINES

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I believe that long before the FMA set foot on Philippine soil, God, in His mysterious ways has set the stage that it might work out. The interior disposition of the Filipino people is one. The religion of the primitive Filipino was animistic. Objects and places were believed to be inhabited by spirits - some good, some bad. The souls of human beings were thought to survive after death and to exert an influence on the living. The belief in an invisible world and in the power of the beings that populated it led naturally to attraction for practices of worship and veneration. It was a fertile ground for evangelization.

It was therefore no wonder that since the discovery of the Philippine archipelago by Magellan in 1521, the conquest and Christianization of the islands proceeded at a fast pace and with considerably less bloodshed compared to Latin America.

To this day, among the nations of the Far East, the Philippines is noted as the only country graced with the gift of Christian faith. 83.5% of the total population are baptized into the catholic faith. How the Filipinos readily accepted the Catholic religion remains an enigma to historians. It is a fact that despite the Philippines' centuries' long contact with other cultures and religions, Roman Catholicism has long been the predominant religion in the country.

The great non-christian religious traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism or Islam though present in the Philippines for centuries have always had a rather restricted influence on its people. The average Filipino grows up peacefully in a catholic universe and becomes habituated to sacred images and practices and participating in traditional religious celebrations and having the school or work calendar interrupted by the Christmas and Holy Week holidays.

Could this openness to the catholic religion be the reason why the FMAs chose the Philippines after their expulsion from Mainland China?

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There are no supporting documents to this effect. What was certain was that as early as 8 March 1955, then Provincial Superior of Hongkong, Sr. Elena Bottini wrote to the FMA General council informing them of her council's decision to accept the invitation of a certain Mr. Federico Ossorio, Vice President of the Victorias Milling Company to start a school for the children of the company's workers specifically the girls in Negros Occidental.

That time, the Salesians were already present in Victorias at the Don Bosco Technical College for boys with Fr. Carlo Braga as Rector of a community with 20 Salesians. In her letter, Sr. Elena Bottini, among other things specified "... from the Philippines we are certain to have good vocations and they said it will not be difficult to open another house immediately after this one would have been established..." (cf. Sr. Elena Bottini, *Letter to the FMA General Council*, Hongkong March 8, 1955).

After the permission from the General Council was obtained, Sr. Catherine Moore, delegate of the Provincial Superior, left Hongkong for the Philippines on 1 December 1955 with Sr. Erminia Borzini to make the necessary preparations. Thus, the first house of the FMA in the Philippines was formally opened by the first Sisters on 8 December 1955 in Victorias, Negros Occidental. The Chronicles of the House started precisely on that day with the significant entry:

"Today, with the help of our heavenly Mother, we begin our work in this land...our small community is made up of Sr. Josephine Gallo, Sr. Ligia Borges and Sr. Erminia Borzini—the Superior of the community...."
(Chronicles of Casa Sacro Cuore, Victorias, December 1955)

On 24 February 1956, the Sisters formally opened the Rosary Kindergarten School with 54 pupils. The name was later changed to St. Mary Mazzarello School, the first school run by the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in the Philippines. Thus begun a journey, which gave birth to the FMA Philippine Province of St. Mary Mazzarello on 8 October 1984. From one house and three pioneer Sisters in 1955, the FMA in the Philippines now count 17 houses (15 in the Philippines and two in Papua New Guinea), 130 perpetually professed FMA, 28 temporarily professed FMA and four novices. Weaned from the FMA Chinese Province in 1984, it has, in its turn given birth to the Timor - Indonesia Visitatoria.

Now, looking back over the past 50 years of FMA presence here in the Philippines and 20 years as an independent province, we count our blessings along the way.

1) Creative fidelity to the Salesian charism and to the spirit of Mornese in the integral education of the young, particularly of young girls. The first seven houses in fact attest to this:

Casa Sacro Cuore in Victorias, Negros with St. Mary Mazzarello School opened in 1955,
Casa Maria Immacolata in Balic-Balic, Manila with Holy Trinity Academy opened in 1958,
Casa San Giuseppe in Canlubang, Laguna with Sta. Cecilia Catholic School opened in 1960,
Casa San Giovanni Bosco in Paco, Manila with the Pius XII Ladies' Dormitory opened in 1965,
Casa Maria Ausiliatrice in Tondo, Manila with the Don Bosco Youth Center opened in 1969,
Casa M Ausiliatrice in Canlubang, Laguna with Mary Help of Christians School opened in 1979,
Casa Madre Mazzarello in Punta, Cebu with Lourdes Kindergarten School opened in 1981.

Going beyond the bounds of formal academic education, the FMA in the Philippines ventured into more challenging apostolate in behalf of the young. Most significant of these are: the creation of Centers for Street Children, Technical/Technological Centers for young women and work among the indigenous people.

1.1. Centers for Street Children -in answer to Jaime Cardinal Sin's appeal to all religious to take care of the numerous Street Children crowding the busy streets of Manila, in 1989, the FMA embarked on this delicate mission encouraging the collaboration of interested lay people. It was not a hit and miss thing because the FMA's zeal for this needy sector of the society was well defined in a five-year plan called "A Journey of Hope" and concretized in the formation of the Laura Vicuña Foundation for Street Children which now enjoy the status of an accredited Non-Government Organization (NGO) with its Board of Directors manned by lay people outstanding in their respective fields in the society.

The Laura Vicuña Center for Street Children in Cubao, Quezon City established on 19 June 1991 obtained government permission to operate on 15 July 1993, full accreditation for Street Children on 15 December 1993 and the more significant accreditation for sexually abused girls on 8 June 2000. Day drop-in centers are also functioning in Don Bosco School, Sta. Mesa, Manila and at the Don Bosco Youth Center in Tondo, Manila.

1.2. Technical/Technological Centers for young women. Aware of the reality that the most urgent problem of Filipino youth is survival, the FMA set to work towards the human promotion of the young among whom they work. More practically, they established centers equipped to train the young in some technical skills so much in demand in this fast changing technological society. Tie-ups and networking with companies and agencies, which can readily employ the trainees become one of the winning features of the FMA *Techcen* (as they are now called) in Sta. Mesa, in Mabalacat, in Malihao, in Mindoro and in Cebu.

At the threshold of the golden jubilee of FMA presence in the Philippines, its Technical Centers have prepared numerous young women to take their rightful place in the world of work as a most necessary step towards a more dignified future for them, for their families and their society.

2) The journey towards the formation of the Educating Community has come almost spontaneously right from the beginning. This may be attributed to the fact that among the Filipino cultural values, the so-called “pakikisama” is a primary value. It is literally translated as “getting along with others” but may well be defined as the willingness to share with one another the burdens as well as the rewards of living together. It is particular to the Filipino that, side by side with others who are similarly motivated, he is strong and can endure.

Thus in all these years, the educative work of the FMA has found willing collaborators from parents, lay teachers, simple friendly neighbors, past-pupils and even from the youth themselves. It is interesting to note that in the archives of each house, lay people are nominated as the first strict collaborators of the first Sisters (the Osorios and Locsins in Victorias, the Silvas in Balic-Balic, the Yulos and Mamons in Canlubang, the Lims and Comejos in Cebu... to name a few). Their collaboration goes beyond material help and assistance as they gradually imbibed the Salesian values and the “*Da mihi animas*”.

To this point, the journey with the Educating Community in each house and at the provincial level has taken us way ahead on the road of communion such that the monthly FMA Day of Spirituality now sees the constant presence of teachers, parents, cooperators, past-pupils and young people. We spend one whole day together to reflect and share on formative themes that will help us become more effective elements of communion in our respective communities.

3) The Salesian Youth Movement (SYM) has become a beautiful reality in the course of the years. In the Salesian Youth Spirituality primer, the “group” has been identified as the privileged place of formation and proposal among the young. It has not been difficult to make the proposal of a common spirituality to the young Filipino who considers the “*barkada*” (literally translated as “group”) as a very strong unit of existence and creates a great sense of belonging. This cultural value makes it almost spontaneous among the Filipino youth to come together as a group sharing whatever is common among them. Based on this ground, the Salesian Youth Movement started off in 1987 as a small group of 25 youth leaders from Holy Trinity Academy, Manila; Sta. Cecilia Catholic School, Canlubang; Mary Help of Christians School, Canlubang and Don Bosco Youth Center, Tondo gathered in the lush green of the FMA Novitiate in Canlubang, Laguna. Reflection and deepening of the Salesian Youth Spirituality charged these young people with contagious enthusiasm coming up with their slogan for DB 88: “With Don Bosco We Can Make It!”. And they did make it! When Mother General, Sr. Marinella Castagno came for her canonical visit in 1989, the Salesian Youth Movement was ready to “explode”.

The formal launching of the Salesian Youth Movement was an event participated in by 12,000 people at the Ateneo Gym in Loyola Heights on 19 November 1989 with the presence of no less than Mother Marinella Castagno, then Superior General of the FMA! This youthful enthusiasm and desire to proclaim God’s love in way particularly Salesian is constantly nourished by a systematic and well defined formation program at the local and provincial level.

To date, the SYM remains the vehicle of the Salesian Youth Spirituality as valid proposal to our young people to pursue holiness and proclaim to all the joy of being children of God! This same Salesian Youth Spirituality characterizes the journey of the whole Educating Community towards communion. This is the journey that will open before us wider horizons in this patch of the Kingdom especially dedicated to the young.