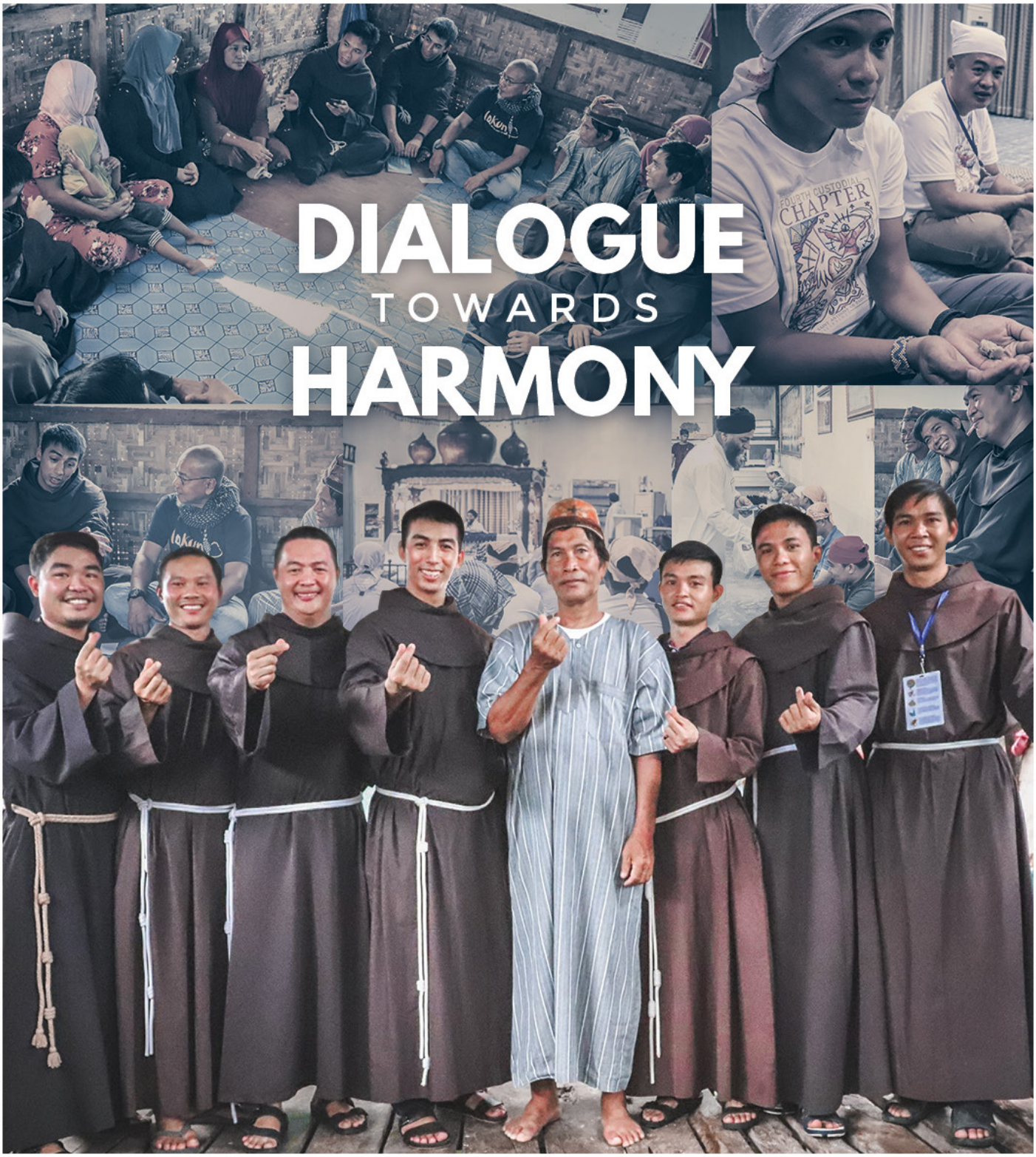
OFM Franciscans Philippines Magazine

Second Issue 2019

communicator



DIALOGUE TOWARDS HARMONY

CHRISTMAS IN A MUSLIM COMMUNITY | THE ULTIMATE MODEL OF DIALOGUE |
A NEW FRANCISCAN SAINT IN HEAVEN | SIMBANG GABI TRADITION & DEVOTION

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THE COVER

The Philippine Catholic Church is celebrating its "Year of Ecumenism, Interreligious Dialogue, and Indigenous Peoples" 2020 with a theme of DIALOGUE TOWARDS HARMONY. Franciscans are irrevocably committed to ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. In the mystery of the Incarnation, Christ became every person's brother, without exception... Franciscans embrace that same path of brotherhood so that, by a kind and reverent presence among both fellow Christians and the sincere members of other religions, they may build up the people God has given them (cf. *OFM Constitutions, 95, §2*). The photos on the cover were taken during the one-week sectoral Immersion of young friars from East Asia Conference for their Common Integration Program this year in the Custody of St. Anthony of Padua, Philippine South.

THE EDITOR

Christmas: the perfect dialogue between God and us



Merry Christmas! This issue brings you the holiday insights as a result of Christ's incarnation. We begin with an advent reflection with a Franciscan twist and the *Simbang Gabi,* a series of dawn Masses prior to Christmas. Let us introduce you to a unique centuries-old popular devotion to the Blessed Virgin and Child Jesus under the title of La'O. Discover the meaning of the letter "O." Then experience Christmas celebrations in a local Muslim area by confrere from the Custody of St. Anthony, and in a foreign mission territory by a Filipino Franciscan friar. By the way, the topics are of the actual moment. It's an innovation introduced in this issue. We will try to be journeying with you on current topics appropriate to the hour.

Our feature article on the birth of Jesus as the ultimate model for dialogue is written by another friar from the Custody and ushers in the Year of Ecumenism and Interreligious dialogue. Another article on the theme tackles overcoming hatred in the name of God.

On the local scene, join us in our pilgrimage with the icon of *Laudato si* with Francis and Clare as we propagate awareness and actions relevant to the respect and care for creation as we, together with our JPIC office, look forward to a God-fearing society. The young ones are invited to check on our Franciscan vlog, starting with our Franciscan novices. Our Franciscan pastors recently created a parish management team. A friar tells us of his vocation story.

On the universal Church level, Pope Francis emphasizes solidarity with various leaders in favor of protecting the Amazon. Let us heed the voices from the Amazon with its lands, peoples and religions. What did the Franciscans do during the Amazonian Synod?

Beyond borders, heeding the mandate from the recent General Chapter and Plenary Council, the East Asian Conference of Franciscans laid the groundwork for the opening here in the Philippines of a Franciscan Study Center in Asia and has planned a lay brothers' gathering in 2020.

Friars solemnly professed ten years and under met at Taizé, France to share how they can be weavers of dialogue, bridge builders and peace artisans of today. Accounts of two participants share about dialogue as trust and about widening horizons.

Meet a new Franciscan third Order saint recently canonized. Why does the Church prefer to canonize persons of recent memory?

Holiday cheers as you travel over the pages. Talk back.

Chito Rañoa, OFM
Editor-In-Chief

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NEWS AROUND THE PROVINCE

Laudato Si' Pilgrim Icon of Francis and Clare arrives in the Philippines



Cielito R. Almazan, OFM, Minister Provincial, together with Angelito Cortez, OFM, JPIC Provincial Animator unveil the Laudato si' icon as it starts its Asian tour in Manila.

The Minister Provincial of the OFM Philippine Province of San Pedro Bautista, Cielito R. Almazan, OFM, together with the JPIC Animator of the Province, Angelito A. Cortez, OFM, officially unveiled the icon of Saint Francis and Saint Clare for the *Laudato Si'* Pilgrimage on October 4, 2019 after the final prayer on the Eucharistic Celebration in honor of the Solemnity of Saint Francis of Assisi at Saint Anthony Shrine in Sampaloc, Manila.

Cortez, a member of the JPIC Animation Committee of the Order, received the pilgrim icon on September 30, 2019 in the General Curia, Rome. It was turned over by Jaime Campos, OFM, JPIC General Animator, and was witnessed by Lino Gregorio Redoblado, OFM, General Definitor for Asia and Oceania.

In 2017, the icon that attracted nearly 60,000 people during its visit to 18 countries in Latin America is now making rounds in different countries and OFM entities in Asia, starting in the OFM Philippine Province with an objective of reminding the friars and Franciscan Family of their commitment to the promotion of the Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* by Pope Francis and experience of the values of Justice and Peace in the care of the common home. It will visit all the OFM communities and parishes of the Province before transferring to the next entity next year. *(Franciscan Communications)*

Youth checks out Franciscan vlog

Youth from various Franciscan parishes and communities tried vlogging as a new means for evangelization during a seminar hosted by the Franciscan Communications Office on October 19, 2019 at the OFM Provincial House.

Vlog is a form of a blog in a video format and is considered to be a hot new trend in social media nowadays. Vlogs appeal to many young people due to its natural and youthful persona. Many popular vlogs present daily events and views of people on a wide array of concerns from political to social issues with just a cellphone or camera in hand.

"It is a surprise that many of our young people could be very creative in this new medium," said Generoso Pastidio, OFM, former director of the Franciscan Communications Office. "I am sure that with their creativity, we could make use of this as a new tool for evangelization," he added. The seminar began with an input by Dexter Toledo, OFM on the New Evangelization and the Rise of the Social Media. The participants then tried presenting some of their interests in a short vlog which they showed to the group.

Cielo Almazan, OFM, in his closing remarks encouraged the youth leaders to freely express their God-given gifts in ways that would bring them closer to their dreams. Cielo, a renowned biblical scholar, gladly shared to the youth his new Facebook page which features some critical studies of a verse from the daily gospel.



Dexter A. Toledo, OFM, director of Franciscan Communications, moderates the one-day seminar-workshop attended by 11 participants from various Franciscan parishes within Metro Manila.

The Franciscan Communications Office hopes to encourage more collaboration among young people through the new evangelization, starting with this Year of the Youth. Currently, the office is trying to relaunched the Shema which will be launched by December 2019. The new Shema will feature talents from the said seminar-workshop. *(Dexter A. Toledo, OFM)*

JPIC Animators look forward towards a God-fearing Society

On the 21st of August, 2019, while the whole nation commemorated the anniversary of the assassination of Former Sen. Ninoy Aquino, the different Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) animators of the Province of San Pedro Bautista gathered at the OFM Provincial House, St. Gregory the Great Friary in Frisco, Quezon City for their assembly.

The Minister Provincial, Cielito R. Almazan, OFM graced the occasion. In his opening remarks, he exhorted the friars to include in the thrust of the provincial JPIC programs the issues on migration, poverty, and climate change vis-a-vis disaster preparedness. He also encouraged the friars to produce literary works like articles, poems, songs, and the like, that depict the work of the province in the promotion of JPIC.

Mr. Edgardo Cabalitan, the Advocacy Officer of the Task Force Detainees of the Philippines, and Mr. Gerry Arances, the Executive Director of the Center of Energy, Ecology and Development, helped the friars to have an in-depth look at the present situation of the human rights and the present state of the environment in the Philippines respectively. They helped the friars understand more the need to work collectively to protect human rights, to divest church investments from companies which destroy the environment and to promote renewable energy.

John Din, MSCC, a lay Columban Missionary, presented to the friars the advocacies of the Global Catholic Climate Movement-Pilipinas, whose primary thrust is to promote Pope Francis' *Laudato Si*. Their program, "Deep Journey into '*Laudato Si*' Symposium," is designed to raise awareness on the urgency to respond to the call to care for our common home.

Cristino Pine, OFM, presented to the friars the summary and challenges of his book, "Living Word on Breathing Earth." On a side note, this book was judged best in the spirituality category during the 13th Cardinal Sin Catholic Book Awards.

In this assembly, the brothers did not just listen to and reflected on the talks given. Each animator shared the programs of their respective communities to promote JPIC and what JPIC concerns and imperatives each parish, friary or community has to address.

"Listening to the brothers on how they work was indeed beautiful and inspiring. Taking into consideration all that has been said and done during the course of the day, the brothers look forward to the realization of the plans made to animate the brothers in the province to help make a God-fearing society where there is justice, peace, and integrity of creation." Angelito A. Cortez, OFM, JPIC Animator of the Province said. *(JPIC)*

Religious life begins for six novices

Liliw, Laguna – Six novices were invested with the habit of probation during the reception rites held on July 15, 2019, at Juan de Plasencia Novitiate Community. Vicar Provincial Reu Jose Galoy, OFM, presided the rites with the Master of Novices Alejo Villanueva, OFM, and Co-Formator Somerset Icalina, OFM, acting as witnesses.

The novices of the Philippine Province were Antonio Elgy Abanes; Ronaldo Arevalo; Seth Jessyl Espina; Marvin Niebla and Joselito Villablanca Jr. Also welcomed during the rite was Marvin Jackson Vincent Voo, a candidate from the Custody of St. Anthony Singapore-Malaysia.

The novitiate is when life in the Order begins *(GGCC V Art. 151)*. It is the second part of the initial formation, postulancy being the first and temporary profession as the last. During the novitiate period, the candidates to the religious life experience are led to a more intense formation. It is organized in a way that initiates them to the actual life and dynamics of living in a community which includes but is not limited to donning of the habit of probation and joining local house chapters.

This period is commonly known as a period of seclusion. Candidates during this stage withdraw from the world. Contact with family and friends, for the whole novitiate period, is minimal to none. This is done so that they may not be distracted in discerning their suitability to religious life.

Juan de Plasencia Novitiate House provides a perfect venue for this stage as it rests at the foot of Mt. Banahaw. This secluded five-hectare property also serves as a hermitage for friars who seek peace and solitude. *(Aaron B. Batistis, OFM)*



Reu Jose Galoy, OFM, Vicar Provincial, joyfully welcomes the new novice with a fraternal embrace during his investiture. *(Photo courtesy ofJuan de Plasencia Novitiate House)*



Friars pose for group photo during their first Pastors' meeting this triennium. *(Photo courtesy of Winston Guerrero)*

Parish Management Team created during the Annual Pastors' Conference

Twenty friars from sixteen parishes of the Province attended the Annual Pastors' Conference at Santuario de San Antonio de Padua Parish, Makati City on July 16-17, 2019 with the theme "Restructuring towards a Contemplative Fraternity in Mission."

The first meeting of the pastors this triennium focused on reflecting on the direction of the Province towards a Contemplative Fraternity in Mission working together as a pastoral team. They also discussed pertinent concerns and drew proposals in view of strategic planning for parish ministry. Napoly M. Pasion, OFM, the Provincial Secretary for Missions and Evangelization, facilitated the meeting.

Provincial Vicar Reu Jose Galoy, OFM delivered the Keynote Address while Provincial Definitor and Secretary for Formation and Studies Christopher Tibong, OFM updated the friars of the need for strategic planning in the parishes. The plans for vocation animation this triennium were discussed by the Provincial Vocation Animator Jhoan Pader, OFM. Other friars also gave talks on specific topics: Joel Sulse, OFM on "Contemplative Fraternity in Mission" and Rodrigo San Jose, OFM on "Franciscan Perspective on Team Ministry."

The pastors decided to create a Parish Management Team (PMT) in all parishes. PMT's main task is to monitor and evaluate the implementation of the Basic Ecclesial Community (BEC) and other parish programs and activities. The members of the team were selected from the different regions to represent the Province well and will assume the responsibilities of Parish Coordinator, Program Coordinator(s) and Finance Officer. They were tasked to create a manual for parish ministry which includes the management of a common fund. The pastors also discussed ways of making standardized financial management of *Buhay Katiwala*. *(Napoly M. Pasion, OFM)*

Pope Francis emphasizes solidarity with indigenous leaders ahead of Amazon Synod



Pope Francis leads all present during the tree-planting ceremony on the occasion of the feast of St. Francis of Assisi, at the Vatican Gardens, two days before a Synod of bishops on the Pan-Amazon region opens. *(Photo courtesy of AP Photo/Alessandra Tarantino/MANILA BULLETIN)*

October 4, 2019, at a powerfully — symbolic event held in the Vatican Gardens, Pope Francis planted a tree alongside Amazonian leaders from Brazil and dedicated the upcoming Synod on the Amazon to St. Francis of Assisi.

The Amazon Synod, which begins Sunday, is a gathering of bishops from around the world who will meet in Rome for three weeks of discussions on how to better care for the Amazon and accompany its people. Long-held concerns about the Amazon's deep social and environmental challenges were recently made evident in the catastrophic wildfires that destroyed forests and indigenous communities.

The tree-planting is Pope Francis' first gesture to mark the Season of Creation, building on a message he issued last September that invited the world's 1.2 billion Catholics to celebrate the season. The Season of Creation is an annual celebration of prayer and action for the environment that is observed by many Christian churches. It began on September 1, the World Day of Prayer for Creation, and concluded on the Feast of St. Francis.

Consecrating the synod to St. Francis is a powerful symbolic gesture with strong resonance in Amazonian countries, where Catholics constitute a majority of the population. In the words of Pope Francis, "St. Francis is the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically." Dedicating the synod to St. Francis signifies the Church's strong commitment to protecting indigenous peoples and the Amazon rainforest.

Ednamar de Oliveira Viana, the indigenous leader from the Maués region, Brazil, who planted the tree alongside the Pope, said, "To plant is to have hope. Planting in the Vatican Garden is a symbol that invites the Church to be even more committed to the forest peoples and all of humanity. But also, it is the denunciation of those who destroy our common home by greed in search of their own profit." The full text of her statement is here.

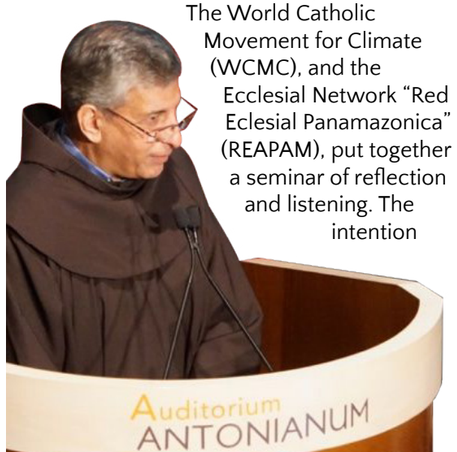
The vulnerability and knowledge of indigenous peoples will be a special focus of the Synod. In the words of the Synod working document, officially called the Instrumentum Laboris, the goal is "to listen to the voice of the Amazon and to respond as a prophetic and Samaritan Church." The indigenous Amazonian concept of "good living," which includes living in harmony with nature, is a guiding principle of the synod's working document. It also contains first-hand accounts and quotations taken from the hundreds of Amazonian community workshops that served as preparation for the synod.

The tree that was planted is a Holm Oak, the tree reputed to have been at the center of one of St. Francis' famous conversations with nature. Its inclusion in the event further emphasizes the Church's commitment to protecting the Amazon rainforest, where deforestation has been accelerating. In the last year, deforestation has increased by as much as 60%, according to Brazil's monitoring agency. *(ofm.org)*

Voices from the Amazon: its land, peoples, and religions

The Pan-Amazon region was chosen as the focus of the Special Synod of Bishops convened by Pope Francis, taking place in Rome this October. The Church wants to hear the voices of the Amazon through its people and its pastors. The listening process began several months ago with a preparatory document that led to the Instrumentum Laboris (IL). The nearly 200 members of the Synod — including 10 Franciscan friars — will work on the IL during these days of "walking together."

The Order (through its JPIC Office), together with the Pontifical University Antonianum, The World Catholic Movement for Climate (WCMC), and the Ecclesial Network "Red Eclesial Panamazonica" (REAPAM), put together a seminar of reflection and listening. The intention is to contribute to the synodal process, by raising the various issues that affect the entire Amazon region.



Julio Bunader, OFM, Vicar General, welcomes the participants of the Amazon Awareness Seminar *(Photo courtesy of ofm.org)*

Opening the event, the OFM Vicar General, Br. Julio Bunader, welcomed the participants and, in line with the Special Synod on the Amazon, highlighted two concepts: Integral Ecology, because "it is based on the recognition of being-in-relationships as a fundamental human category. This means that we develop as human beings on the basis of our relationships with ourselves, with others, with society in general, with nature/environment, and with God." (IL47). The second concept is that of Integral Conversion, because it is "an 'integral personal conversion' that comes from the heart and opens up to a 'communal conversion' recognizing its social and environmental links, that is, an 'ecological conversion'." (IL101)

The seminar developed in three sections. "Voices of Governments" had presentations from María Elvira Velásquez Rivas-Plata, Ambassador from Peru to the Holy See and Jorge Mario Eastman, Ambassador from Colombia to the Holy See. Then, "The Peoples Voices," which included presentations from José Luiz Cassuppà, an indigenous leader invited to the Synod, Sr. Laura Vicuña, a member of the Congregation of Franciscan Catechists, and Br. Joao Messias Sousa, OFM. The president of CELAM, Mons. Héctor Miguel Cabrejos, OFM and theologians Tania Ávila and Alirio Cáceres spoke during the third part of the seminar, entitled "Voice of the Church". *(ofmjpic.org)*

Fraternal Meeting of Franciscans at the Amazonian Synod

The brothers and sisters of the Franciscan Family who participated in the Synod for the Amazon region gathered in the Generalate of the Friars Minor in Rome for a time of fraternity. On 24th October, the group went to the Church of Santa Maria Mediatrice where they prayed Vespers together with the fraternity and shared dinner in an atmosphere of brotherhood and joy.

There were 30 members of the Franciscan Family present at the Synod, including 3 cardinals, 17 bishops, 4 sisters, 4 friars and 2 sisters of the Secular Franciscan Order. Coming from different countries, they were "synod fathers," auditors and experts. The Synod, which had as its central theme the defence of the life of peoples, biodiversity and our "common home," reached an extensive diagnosis and produced a final document with specific proposals for "new paths for the church and for an integral ecology." *(ofm.org)*

East Asian friars collaborate for GenChap 2021

BY DEXTER A. TOLEDO, OFM



East Asia Conference (EAC) Ministers' Meeting in Vung Tau City, Vietnam. *(Photo courtesy of Peter Thien, OFM)*

The ministers of the East Asia Conference (EAC) vowed to support the Philippine Province who host the first OFM General Chapter in Asia after the Order's 800 years of existence. This is one of the resolutions made during the Annual Ministers' Meeting held from October 14–17, 2019 in Vung Tau City, Vietnam.

The ministers promised to extend assistance to the Philippines through finance and also through friar-personnel which could serve as interpreters and translators during the General Chapter. The friars from South Asia (SAAOC) will be having their meeting this March 2020 and is set to discuss the same topic as one of their agenda.

Franciscan Study Centre

The EAC friars also decided during that same meeting to begin offering short courses in August 2020 to serve as building blocks of the Franciscan Study Center in Asia towards a full academic center as envisioned by FCAO.

Among the short courses to be offered by the Franciscan Study Center in Asia is a Renewal Program (3 months) for friars celebrating their jubilees focused on strengthening human, Christian and Franciscan aspects of our life. The ministers also planned to offer a Training for Guardians and Formators (3 weeks) on Leadership and Management particularly in the area of Professional Standards and Code of Conduct. The three EAC Secretaries will also offer courses in the areas of JPIC, Formation and Studies; as well as Missions and Evangelization, suited to our Asian context.

EAC Lay Brothers Gathering 2020

The ministers also agreed to hold the Second Lay Brothers Gathering in Vietnam in 2020 to be organized by the EAC Secretariat for Formation and Studies and also to send friar animators and lay partners to the International JPIC Course to be held in the Philippines on May 4–9, 2020.

All the ministers are grateful to the Province of Vietnam for graciously hosting the meeting this year. The Province of Vietnam also celebrates their 90th foundation anniversary this year.



Friars pose for their group shot during the Annual Ministers' Meeting. *(Photo courtesy of Peter Thien, OFM)*



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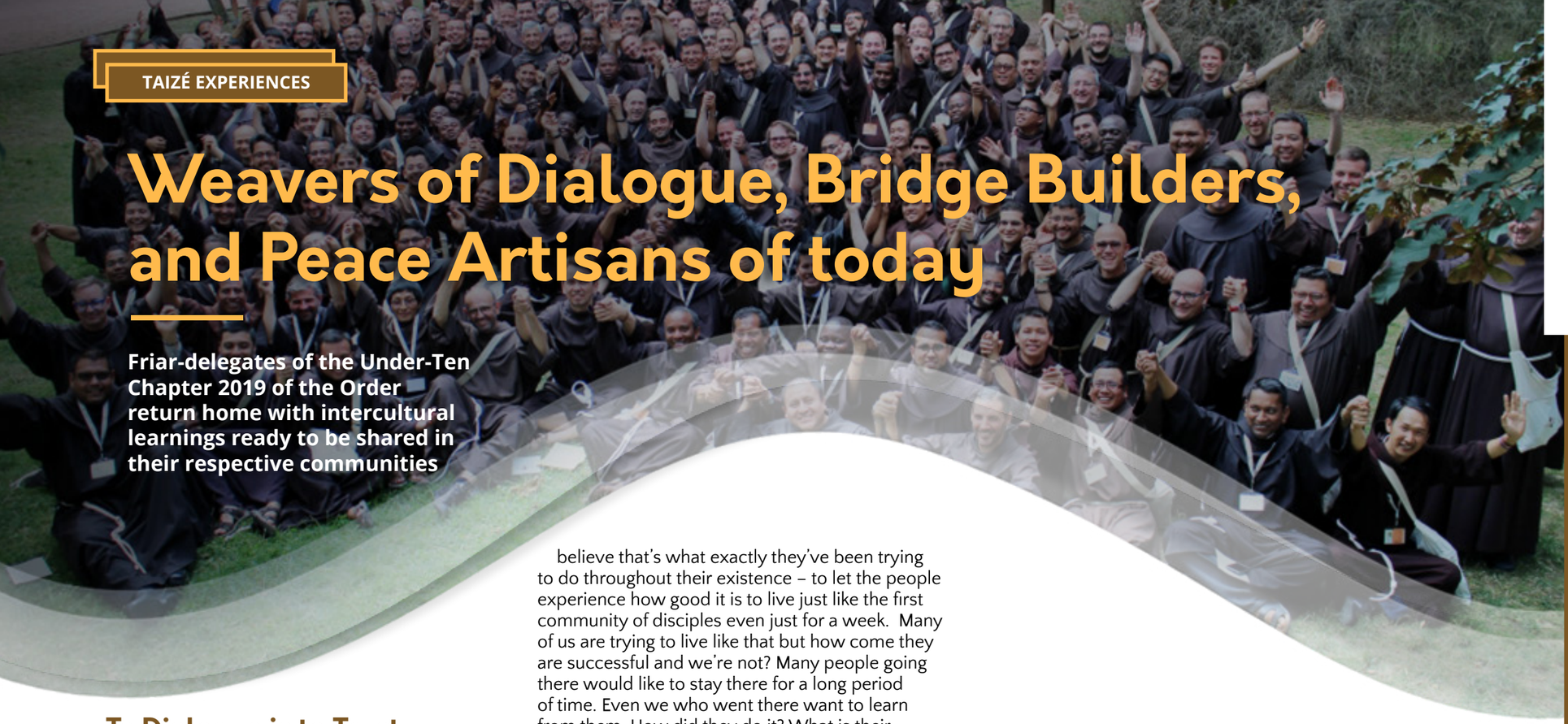
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Weavers of Dialogue, Bridge Builders, and Peace Artisans of today

Friar-delegates of the Under-Ten Chapter 2019 of the Order return home with intercultural learnings ready to be shared in their respective communities



To Dialogue is to Trust

BY DOMINADOR R. VALDEZ, JR., OFM

It was really a great privilege to be one of the delegates to the 2019 Chapter of Mats of friars perpetually professed under ten. Not only because I got the chance to experience travelling to Europe once again but more so because I got the chance to be in that particular place where the Chapter of Mats was held.

Taizé, France – that's what they call the place. Brothers of Taizé – that's what they call the community of brothers living there.

The place is not so special. There are other places in the world that are surely more beautiful and attractive. The community of brothers are also just like any other community of brothers in the world. But the way they live their lives and the way they affect the lives of different people whether near or far – that's what makes the place and the community of brothers very especial.

There I have learned, through the community of the brothers of Taizé, that living exactly the same as the first community of disciples is possible. I believe that's what exactly they've been trying to do throughout their existence – to let the people experience how good it is to live just like the first community of disciples even just for a week. Many of us are trying to live like that but how come they are successful and we're not? Many people going there would like to stay there for a long period of time. Even we who went there want to learn from them. How did they do it? What is their secret? I believe it is their constant persistence in encouraging everyone to live a life of "hospitality." Hospitality demands everyone to trust.

I was very lucky to do such while mingling with my brothers in the chapter of Mats under ten with the theme "Dialogue" which I believe calls for the same – to trust. I was very fortunate to have realized too that while it is very important to dialogue with our brothers and sisters of different faith, culture and orientation, or even with our own Franciscan brothers around the world; it is equally important to dialogue with our brothers in our own respective Franciscan community back home!

Widening Horizons

BY PATTRICK SUJEEWA PERRERA, OFM

If there will be one phrase that could best summarize my Taizé experience, it would be: "Widening Horizons."

It was such an adventure to travel from Sri Lanka alone. Thank God, there are many European people who helped me find my way. Upon my arrival in Taizé, I was glad to see some familiar faces. Among those would be some Filipinos who studied with me in the Philippines. Then I also recognized some familiar faces from South Korea, Myanmar and Vietnam whom I met during the East Asian Conference's Common Integration Program.

What I consider to be most helpful in widening my horizon in seeing these European young people. Before, I used to think that there is already a decline in spirituality among the youth in the Western world. But I was amazed to see that even amidst the modernization, there is still that intense longing to have a intense experience of God. I was inspired by how they prayed with great passion and enthusiasm.

Taizé experience also gave us young Franciscan friars a chance to learn from each other. In our small group sharing, we discussed our vision for the Church and the Order. Indeed, I am thankful to be part of this historic gathering. I do hope that more gathering like this could be organized so as to intense not only our Franciscan identity but also our Christian faith.

Under Ten OFM Taizé 2019

Protagonists of the Chapter

The Tau symbolizes the Order of Friars Minor. In the logo it is intended to indicate both the individual friar and the friar fraternity in general. By evoking the cross of Christ it is identified with Christ himself.

The Tau is the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In the prophet Ezekiel (9,4) and in the Apocalypse (7: 2-3), it is presented as a sign of salvation. Because of its resemblance to the cross, it was adopted by Christians as a reminder of their belonging to Christ. This sign was also very dear to St. Francis (FF 990).

Location of the Chapter

Taizé is a small town in France located in the region of Burgundy-Franche-Comte. In 1940 Roger Schutz (frére Roger) founded a monastic-ecumenical community there. Today the Taizé community has about one hundred brothers, Catholics and of different evangelical origins, coming from almost thirty nations.

By its very existence, the community embodies the full meaning of dialogue, brotherhood and peace. It is the privileged place of reconciliation between divided Christians and separated peoples. The official logo of the community is shown on the letter "e" of the word "Taizé" (in the acute accent).

Theme of the Chapter

The theme of the chapter is "Friars in dialogue." The Seraphic Father St. Francis, throughout his life, was a man of dialogue: with his brothers and sisters, with the Church, with every creature on the Earth and in the Sky.

Today, more than ever, the need to be "weavers" of dialogue, builders of bridges, and artisans of peace challenges every friar and the life of every fraternity.

(Source: www.undertenofm.org)

ADVENT REFLECTION

Let us begin again!

BY BERNARDO M. LANUZA, OFM

It's Advent! Let us begin again in joy and in great anticipation for the coming of Jesus Christ in our midst

Let us begin again, for until now we have done nothing," Francis uttered these words as he was nearing his death. He knew that conversion is never a single moment and a flash of lightning but a lifelong journey. Thus, every day we need to constantly renew our commitment to Christ which we vowed in our baptism, to follow the Gospel as we have promised in our profession, to be closer to God as our spirituality would demand. This advent season is an inception of a new liturgical year, is a perfect time to begin again, and a fresh start for each of us as Christians and as consecrated persons in general chosen and called to proclaim the eschatological hope.

In the Incarnation, Jesus, in divesting himself of divine glory to embrace a poor human existence except for sin elevated all of our humanness to its divine condition. For St. Francis, a lectio on this mystery was at the heart of his understanding of who God is. It is the heart of every Franciscan's wholehearted embrace of poverty, of humility, of all of the divine values. If Jesus could empty himself totally, surely we as Friars could let go of a luxurious lifestyle and the quest for glory and admiration. Thus, we can show to the world through the years how to let go of the pride and possessions that kept us from living the Gospel to its fullest extent. The joy and simplicity of the season is a reminder to let go of our vanities and embrace a more divine emptying. In this spirit, we might focus our Advent activities on personal and communal prayer, on charity and on reflecting on the true meaning of Incarnational spirituality.

"I have done what is mine to do. May Christ show you what is yours to do." Francis knew that we are ultimately following Christ. As friars, we are not imitating a man who lived in the Middle Ages but about seeing through his life the message of Christ for all people in all times and places. "When I was in sin," is the down-to-earth way to express the need to do penance this season of Advent and to begin again. That is why, as 1 Celano 109 states, Francis exhorts his brothers to begin again to do penance, even though he had become an expert in Gospel perfection and a living icon of Christ crucified. The sense of being in sin, that is, of lacking union with Christ, takes the concrete form of discovering Christ in this joyful and anticipatory season.

However, as I reflected on what this Advent meant to me, I came to see it as having four different characteristics or seasons if you will, that spoke to me. These characteristics were epitomized by the elements of hope, gladness, promise, and love.

The Spirituality of the season of Advent

1. "It is a season of Hope (The symbol of Candle)

Hope brings out a desire, a longing, or a want. It is thought to be true, and for those that hold with this truth, the belief that it will happen. The season of Advent is not only a remembering in anticipation of a time when our longing would be answered, but it encompasses the hope of one promised to us in the future, the Letter to the Hebrews attests to this reality, *"Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see* (Heb. 11:1). Hope contains a sense of trust and reliance on something or someone that engenders optimism for the future. This hope, when it is placed in "God, who has and continues to provide help for a struggling and longing humanity, will strengthen our resolve. It is expressed in our desire, accompanied by the expectation and belief in fulfillment. It can and does encourage our preparation for the event as well as the transformation that occurs as our hope grows stronger.

Lastly, when our hope is centered on the Son of God, who was promised to come, came, and has promised to come again, we develop greater endurance. We can say the following, along with Francis,

Most High, glorious God, enlighten the darkness of my heart and give me true faith, certain hope, and perfect charity, sense and knowledge, Lord, that I may carry out Your holy and true command. (*FAED Vol.1, p.40*)

This same Lord, our Christ, whose Advent we celebrate, is our guarantor, our friend, and our strength."

FRANCIS'S HOPE: BEING LITTLE AMONG GOD'S LITTLE ONES"

"With this powerful gesture, Francis definitively began his journey of living *sine proprio* though, with this gesture, he also affirmed his littleness as a creature before God, Because of this, he came to identify with the minors and sought together with his brothers to show the little ones that God loved and cared for them, that "God dwelt not only in monasteries and fancy churches but also among them as well."

Minority is inviting us to do things like heading for the exit signs of the Church, specifically in this season of Advent going out into the streets and seeking out those who are not only materially poor but also those who feel marginalized and excluded from the Church and society for many different reasons.

2. "It is a season of Gladness" (The symbol of the manger)

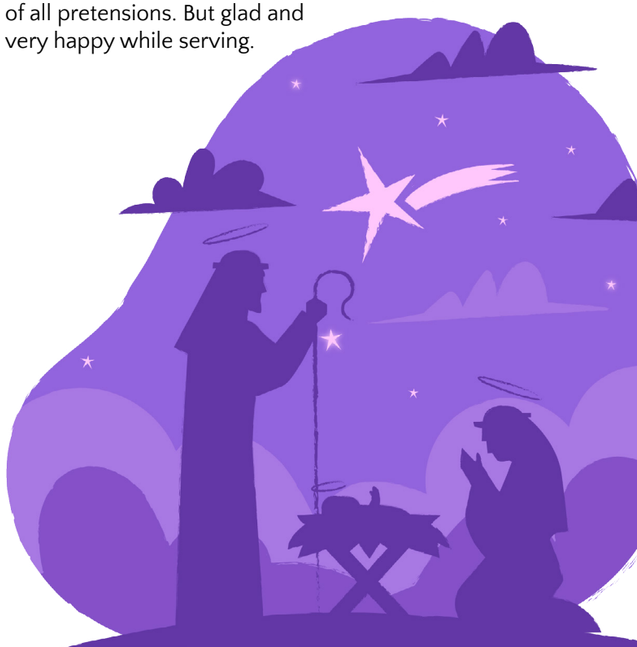
In this season, we extol this great joy that came for all the world with great celebrations, appreciation, and jubilation, for with the birth of Jesus the whole of creation was made glad. Doing this with expressions of great joy in spite of lacking necessities in life!

" He who once enjoyed wearing scarlet robes now traveled about half-clothed. Once while he was singing praises to the Lord in French in a certain forest, thieves suddenly attacked him. When they savagely demanded who he was, the man of God answered confidently and forcefully: "I am the herald of the great King! What is it to you?" They beat him and threw him into a ditch filled with deep snow, saying: "Lie there, you stupid herald of God!" After they left, he rolled about to and for, shook the snow off himself and jumped out of the ditch. Exhilarated with great joy, he began in a loud voice to make the woods resound with praises to the Creator of all." (*FAED Vol. 194*)

FRANCIS'S JOY AND SPIRITUAL NAKEDNESS

Pretentious people are sad. Simple people are always happy. By claiming nakedness as a Franciscan virtue, I am referring to the sense of Franciscans being "real" and being "down to earth". Perhaps another way of stating this is to say, in *the words of Pope Francis, that Franciscans, above all, are to have "the smell of the sheep" on them.* What I think the pope is saying when he uses this expression is that, as Christians, we are not to stand above the fray, looking down on the weak and the sinful, but rather as fellow sinners ourselves, we are to walk with them, identifying with their struggles.

To be naked in this sense also means a complete refusal to engage in clericalism. Once again referring to Pope Francis, we would do well to heed his warnings against lay clericalism as well. Perhaps rather than using the word clericalism, we can say that the Franciscan goes about stripped of all pretensions. But glad and very happy while serving.



3. "It is a season of Promise" (the symbol of Jesse Tree)

In Advent, we celebrate God's greatest promise to us. If we know what he has said, we can live in the confidence of his promises because he has proven himself over and over again in our religious life. It gives us assurance in the successful outcome of all His words of promise. We may not see the conclusion or understand the way they will come into being; we can have the confidence that the end will be perfect and excellent. Indeed, we are blessed when we keep secret the accomplishments we have done.

"Blessed is the servant who stores up in heaven the good things which the Lord shows to him and does not wish to reveal them to people under the guise of a reward, (Mt 6:20) because the Most High Himself will reveal His deeds to whomever He wishes.
Blessed is the servant who safeguards the secrets of the Lord in his heart." (Admonitions 28)

FRANCIS AND THE PROMISE OF JESUS CHRIST: HOLD ON TO ITS MESSAGE.

It is important to understand what is meant by "living the Gospel." It is not just a matter of literally living out the various teachings of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, although Francis does quite a bit of that. It is rather radically to base one's life on the belief that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that He became human, lived, suffered, died, and rose from the dead that we might have life.

One time when Francis was conversing with Leo, "he asked him, what is perfect joy?" Francis answered that if they were to knock on a friary door late on a rainy night and be thrown out and cursed by the friar who answered the door, then that would be perfect joy.

For many of us friars, this story has been the source of humor causing us to roll our eyes when a superior or another friar treats us poorly. The real value of the story is that if we have truly internalized the truth of the Gospel and grounded our life in the "good news," then we have something that not even the worst mistreatment can take away. That, my brother, is truly a cause for joy.

Joy then is not happiness, giddiness, or just having fun. Those things are great, but they are passing. True joy comes from having something that gives ultimate meaning to our lives even in the face of great adversity. I pray for all who seriously lived an existential Franciscan Life that following Francis and living the Gospel will produce lasting joy in our life.

4. "It is a season of Love" (The symbol of gratuitous gift)

In what we Franciscans call the Earlier Rule of St. Francis, we find many beautiful expressions of Francis's devotion, expressions which show how he understood God. One example of this is found in Chapter 23 of that rule where he writes, *"All-powerful, most holy, Almighty and supreme God, Holy and just Father, Lord King of heaven and earth we thank you for yourself for through your holy will and Your only Son with the Holy Spirit You have created everything spiritual and corporal..."* Further on, he continues, *"We thank You for as through Your Son You created us, so through Your holy love with which You loved us You brought about His birth as true God and true man by the glorious, ever-virgin, most blessed, holy Mary and you willed to redeem us captives through His cross and blood and death."*

We have said that God is love, but do we truly comprehend all that love is? A love, that is strong, that is patient, long-suffering, understanding, and true, yet it also has discipline, disciplines, and is capable of wrath when this love is violated. Total love is one that rejoices in the growth and benefit of the other. It is a complete love because it reflects the best in a brother even as he is struggling. Love surprises! God's gift to humanity, the ultimate gift of eternal life through His Son, Jesus Christ, came in the simplest and humblest of wrappings, as Francis liked to say in the simplest form of a "piece of bread." We are unworthy of this great gift! We don't give gifts to the person who has been slandering our name or to the angry friar who never has a kind word to say to us. Yet God gave us His gift when we were His enemies. He didn't give this gift to us because we deserved it. It was just the opposite. "But God demonstrates His love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8), which is the greatest gift ever given.

> "*True joy* comes from having something that gives ultimate meaning to our lives even in the face of great adversity.

This gift manifests to us something about the one who gives! When God decided to give us the gift of eternal life, it was not something that He just thought of on any other thing. He gives out of his being, thus he is the giver par excellence.

Advent is the celebration of the story of this great love for us. He has gratuitously donated this love so immensely that He left behind His divine nature. Then as if His example were not enough, God also gave us a perfect description of this love, a concrete love It can be found in 1 Corinthians, so it is available to remind our callous memory any time we need a reminder that *Love never fails*." (1 Corinthians 13: 4-8)

Much to our dismay, at times, discipline or lessons need to be applied and learned. Responsible freedom and love need discipline. We can be confident that until the lesson we need to learn for our growth is well and truly incorporated, God in His love will place the lesson before us again. Love defeats vices and deformation.

"Where there are charity and wisdom, there is neither fear nor ignorance. Where there are patience and humility, there is neither anger nor disturbance. Where there is poverty with joy, there is neither greed nor avarice. Where there are rest and meditation, there is neither anxiety nor restlessness. Where there is fear of the Lord to guard an entrance, Lk 11:21 there the enemy cannot have a place to enter. Where there is a heart full of mercy and discernment, there is neither excess nor hardness of heart." (Admonition 27)

Advent is that wonderful anticipatory season where we look forward to celebrating the coming of Christ. Is it not marvelous that God after so long deigned to again come in a form that we would be able to walk and talk without special precautions? Consider the magnitude of the love that our God has shown for us that he sought us out where we were and is continuing to seek His children where ever they have wandered. In this act, He seeks only to persuade, not to coerce or force, our return to the joy of his companionship. "May we be open to the unexpected which is often God's way of surprising us and showing us that Christ has come and promising that he will come again.

Let us pray with St. Bonaventure

"I pray, O God, that I may know you and love you, so that I may rejoice in you. And if I cannot do so fully in this life, at least let me go forward day by day until that point of fullness comes. Let the knowledge of you grow in me here, and there be made complete. Let your love grow in me here; and there be made complete, so that here my joy may be great with expectancy, and there be complete in reality. Lord, through your Son you command, or rather counsel us to ask; and through Him that you promise that we shall receive, so that our joy may be complete. I ask, Lord, as you counsel through our Wonderful Counselor, may I receive what you promised through your truth so that my Joy will be complete, O God of truth. I ask that I might receive so that my joy might be complete. Until then, let my mind meditate on it. Let my tongue speak of it. Let my heart love it. Let my mouth express it. Let my soul hunger for it. Let my flesh thirst for it, my whole being desire for it, until I enter into the joy of my Lord, who is God three and one, blessed forever, amen." (Breviloqium, Part VII p. 300-301)

May the Lord born in a manger continue to give us his joyful love and embrace. Come, Lord Jesus, come as you promise, as you love and as we hope in joyful anticipation.

May the Lord give you his peace.

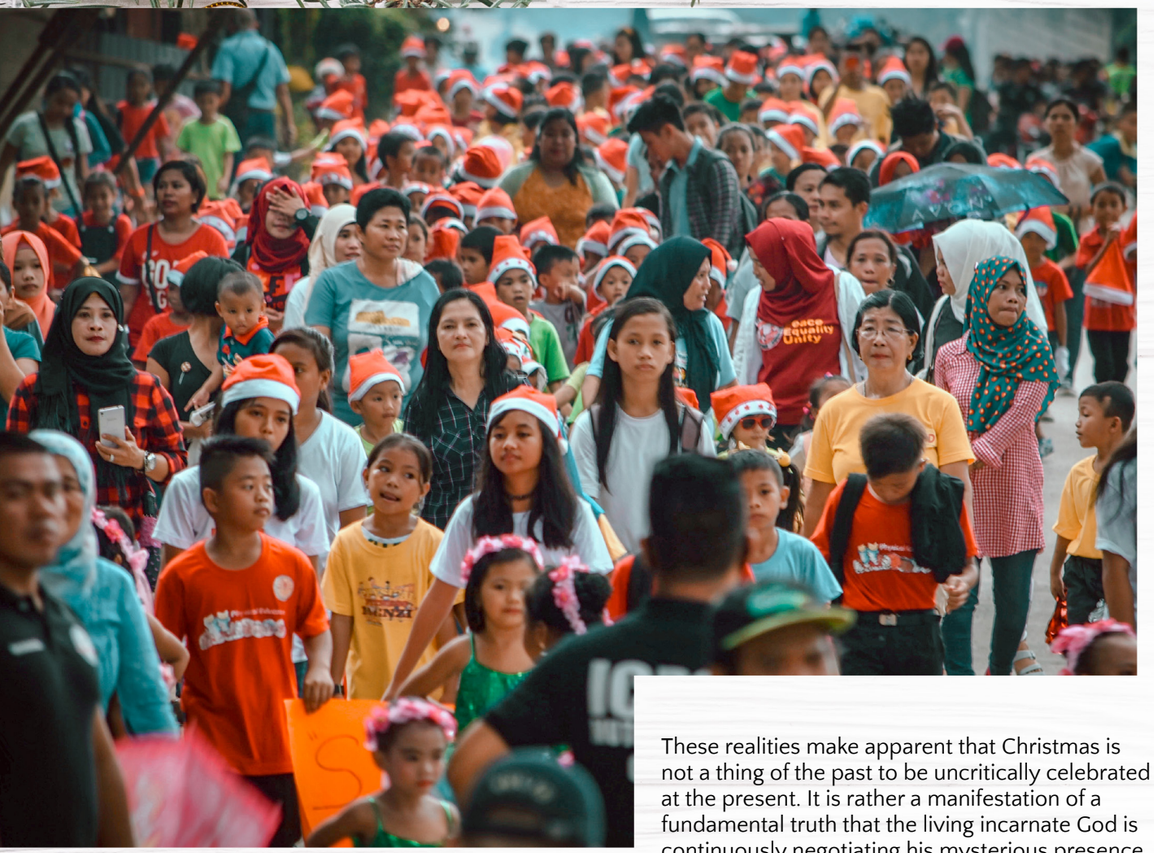
COVER FEATURE

Christmas in a Muslim Community

BY NEIL J. BADILLO, OFM

Discovering the new meanings of Christmas with different perspective and context

Life-size Christmas Belen created by Tope Villanueva, OFM, for the Sagrado Corazon de Jesus Parish, Lo-ok, Lamitan Basilan.



Photos of Christians and Muslims celebrating Christmas together. *(Photos courtesy of Neil J. Badillo, OFM)*

The changing of patterns of human interactions alter various human cultural expressions. This includes established religious tradition like Christmas. From essentially a religious practice within the confines of the church, it has evolved into a highly commercialized and commodified holiday season enshrined in shopping malls. A secular society could uphold freedom of religious expression but it could simultaneously prohibit public display of Christmas symbols to avoid offending different religious sensibilities. Christian minority like Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) and refugees may have celebrated clandestine Christmas in foreign lands while a very tolerant multi-cultural Christian community would celebrate Christmas freely with their Muslim neighbors.

These realities make apparent that Christmas is not a thing of the past to be uncritically celebrated at the present. It is rather a manifestation of a fundamental truth that the living incarnate God is continuously negotiating his mysterious presence in our paradoxical and sometimes hostile world. The clashing Christmas symbols manifest our ambivalent human standards and values. If the chubby bearded Santa Claus and attractive malls are our significant symbols, we might find ourselves, as well, involved in a rat race with buying-frenzy people of a throw-away society. If we could see incarnation as a flight of the 'unwelcome' and 'undocumented' God into the human world, Christmas could mean hospitality for Immanuel ('God with us'), as well as the refugees and the migrants. If we consider Christmas as the apex of God's *kenosis* – his identification with the lost, the least, and the last, then, with urgency, we search for God in the peripheries. If we are situated within a place with history of conflict and woundedness like the predominantly Muslim community in Basilan, Christmas will definitely be more than just a celebration minus the sweet ham (*haram* food for Muslim) and firecrackers (banned for security reason) but as an opening door for dialogue. Therefore, our context and

> Celebrating *Christmas in a Muslim area* made me realize that God indeed makes himself available and perceptible to all in creative and surprising ways.

symbols are sources of how our theology for Christmas and its corresponding praxis proceed. The church challenges not only that we celebrate it meaningfully but also to discover new meanings of it relevant to different context of our people.

Celebrating Christmas in a Muslim area allows me to experience God's abiding presence in an unchartered and yet a place so familiar. During my first year in Basilan, Christmas was like revisiting that evening of the nativity in the Lukan and Matthean accounts. It is entering into that stable where the baby Jesus was born lying in a manger with Joseph and Mary at his sides together with unexpected visitors – the shepherds and wise men from the east, considered by Jewish moral standards as 'sinners' and quintessential outsiders respectively. The experience is transformative. It was an experience of connectedness with God who connects us with the 'others'. It is an experience of divine wholeness amidst human fragmentation and isolation. It is an experience of God's grace amidst our woundedness, God's joy amidst our uncertainties, God's light while walking in the darkness of sin, God's hope amidst our hopelessness, and God's assurance amidst our helplessness.

Celebrating Christmas in a Muslim area made me realize that God indeed makes himself available and perceptible to all in creative and surprising ways. God uses ordinary people and familiar events in negotiating and crossing human divides – be it cultural, religious, age, gender, ideological, political, etc. While we believe that Christmas is for children, it is indeed for all children – Christian and Muslim alike whose simple joys are identical and pure while enjoying things as simple as plates of spaghetti and slice of fried chicken and receiving their inexpensive Christmas gifts.

Christmas means business, as well, in the cities of Lamitan and Isabela. Local Muslim entrepreneurs sell Christmas decorations to accommodate the needs of their Christian clients. Their transactions maybe are functional or relational, but unconsciously they are mutually supporting the gradual growth of a particular culture that connects them in spite of their differences.

Who said that joyful and sentimental Christmas carols are only for Christians? Two excited Muslim mothers in Tairan asked the parish youth to sing Christmas carols in their respective homes, too.







They both explained that since Christmas is an essential element of the faith of their Christian neighbors, as peace-loving Muslims, this is their way of showing their true respect.

A chapel leader in Lumuton, Looc, Lamitan organized her chapel Christmas party with their Muslim neighbors as her families joined as well, in their annual Hari Raya Idul Fitri festival. It is not a rare sight that Muslim houses in Tairan are decorated with Christmas lights and trees. They (the Muslims) may not have totally understood and would not even believe in the theological meaning of Christmas with its signs and symbols but like their Christian counterparts, they have other common theological reasons to celebrate, to be in solidarity with their community, to show respect and love for neighbors whose ways of sharing, loving, caring and celebrating may have nuances in expression that may be unknown to them but whose essence are similar or completely the same.

> “God initiated a *dialogue* with us, his people. To make that *dialogue* possible, he stooped down to our human level by being born like us in almost all traits except individualism and self-centeredness.

At Christmas, God initiated a dialogue with us, his people. To make that dialogue possible, he stooped down to our human level by being born like us in almost all traits except individualism and self-centeredness. To dialogue with God today means to dialogue with the ‘other’ and the ‘outsider’ and to rediscover that God is actually leading us back to the manger.



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146,700 *Affected Population*

17 *Dead*

609 *Injured*

15,000 *Displaced*

Damaged Infrastructure

757 *Schools*

26 *Commercial*

37 *Health Facilities*

30 *Public Structures*

16 *Roads & Bridges*

6 *Places of Worship*

FEATURE ARTICLE

The birth of Jesus:

An ultimate model of Dialogue

BY ANTONIO MARIA ROSALES, OFM

Why did Jesus come to earth? What image does St. Francis want us to understand with the Christmas Crib in Greccio? Let us reflect on the CBCP theme for 2020 and the Christmas Crib in Greccio



The last theme in the country's nine-year "novena" in preparation for the 5th centenary of the coming of Christianity (1521-2021) is *Ecumenism and Inter-Religious Dialogue*. Since 2012, when we started this journey of greater and concrete response to the challenge of our faith through the new evangelization, we have focused on different sectors and related themes.

The concept and reality of DIALOGUE are found in the Incarnation, dramatically presented to us at Christmas, with the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is in fact the ultimate model of what dialogue should be. It is a dialogue between God and humanity. However, since dialogue demands that the two parties be on an equal basis, on the same level, the party that is "higher" must come down. God, being infinitely higher had to "come down" to the level of humanity, his own creation! to make the dialogue happen. We have to take note, however, that when we speak of dialogue between God and us, we are speaking of dialogue by analogy, and not really in the real meaning of the word, as that would never be possible, because God will always be infinitely higher and unreachable as far as man is concerned.

But the reality that we have through revelation is already so wonderful in itself, as expressed so graphically by St. Paul: "Though his state (*nature*) was divine, he did not cling to his equality with God, but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave, and being as all men are, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross .." (Phil. 2:5-11). "To empty himself" - Greek *kenosis* - Jesus did not (and could not) abandon his divine nature; but it entailed accepting the limitations of a human existence that in fact ended with the utter humiliation of death by crucifixion (cf. *kenosis* in Collins & Farrugia, *A Concise Dictionary of Theology*). That was how the dialogue was realized. Having come down to our level, God through Jesus was able to reveal to us things of God and us and about how we are to be with each other.

> "St. Francis of Assisi wanted to share with the people of Greccio... the very reality of the *"poverty"* of the God-made-man in the unbelievable form of a helpless infant.

Christmas is not just an emotional recollection of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, but for St. Francis it was to show the level of the "emptying" that Jesus made possible not only through the poverty and simplicity of the material conditions of his birth, but even more deeply through the state of total dependence and helplessness as an infant. It was an image that St. Francis in Greccio in 1223 wanted the brothers and the people present to grasp, as he spoke on this in his sermon that evening, that he was so moved by the reality of that mystery of God becoming a baby.

The baby born on Christmas is more than just the "cuteness" associated with babies. It was the helplessness, the total dependence found in the nature of infancy = his openness to the uncertainty, the poverty of either being cuddled, loved and cared for, or being rejected, abandoned and not "something" to waste time on. It was not just the poor and simple surroundings of his birth that St. Francis of Assisi wanted to share with the people of Greccio, but the very reality of the "poverty" of the God-made-man in the unbelievable form of a helpless infant.

It would have been possible for God to reveal himself as a powerful, wise, impressive, grown-up teacher, but the response he would receive would have been guided by the intimidating presence he would project. Coming as an infant, however, was less threatening for anybody, which, of course, Jesus was until it was time for him to reveal the truth about himself. Indeed, God's ways are not our ways, and this would bring us to reflect on our lives and personal relationship with the Lord.

This awareness would deeply mark the spirituality of St. Francis, one that was a product not of study, but of deep contemplation of the mystery of the incarnation, which he handed on to the rest of the members of his brotherhood and the Franciscan Movement for all time to come. This legacy of Francis would be absorbed by the Christian tradition in its popular devotions and practical living of the faith.

While the CBCP theme for 2020 is understood in the obvious way as a dialogue with other faiths, both Christian and not, it could be understood in the context of Christmas as A Dialogue with the Poor, "poor" being understood not in its common understanding as referring generally to the economically poor, but to all who are in some form of dependence, which, in the end, all of us are, since we are dependent on God for our health, our well-being, our life, and ultimately our salvation through his mercy.

The coming celebration of the 5th centenary of the coming of Christianity is both a celebration of gratitude as well as a confession of our "littleness" before God, our need for his presence and support through Jesus. When the missionaries came in the 1500s, they revealed to us Christ who was already and always has been present among our people, though veiled, and after 500 years, it is perhaps necessary to unveil that Christ some more, and reveal him in the eyes of children who are abandoned and abused, and in the anguished faces of our brothers and sisters, those of other faiths, as well as our indigenous peoples, who suffer injustice, discrimination, poverty and neglect. Taking off this "veil" that has kept Jesus Christ still hidden for so many of us would be one of the precious graces and blessings of our 5th Centenary celebration. So be it. May the Lord give us peace this Christmas and always.

FRANCISCAN SAINT

A new Franciscan in Heaven

BY FR. ANDRES B. RAÑOA, JR., OFM

Meet Saint Marguerite Bays, a Franciscan tertiary known for her great faith and sense of compassion. Reminding us of call to holiness

Who is Marguerite Bays? Why was she canonized as saint recently as over Mother Geronima de la Asuncion, OSC, foundress of the first Poor Clare monastery in the Philippines, and others whose causes have long been submitted to the Church for approval?

A "cause" is the process of canonization that can lead to sainthood. It usually starts after five years after a person's death. Pope John Paul waived the five-year period for Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who died in 1997, and Pope Benedict waived it for Pope John Paul, who died in 2005.

Miracles are not necessary if a person was a martyr. Otherwise, if a miracle is determined, the person can be "beatified" and is given the title "Blessed." John XXIII was beatified in 2000 and John Paul in 2011. A second, distinct miracle must take place after the beatification to proceed to sainthood.

John Paul is credited with two miracles. John XXIII, on the other hand, is credited with only one. Pope Francis waived the requirement of the second, ruling that there was no doubt that John was a holy man.

For Marguerite Bays who died in 1879 the beatification process began in 1929. Another local process lasted till 1955. After the two processes were ratified, she was declared "Venerable" in 1990. A miracle was ratified in 1991. John Paul II approved it in 1993 and beatified her in 1995

A second miracle was investigated and approved in 2018. Pope Francis concurred and canonized her alongside Mariam Theresia Chiramel, John Henry Newman, Irmã Dulce Pontes and Giuditta Vannini at St Peter's Basilica on 13 October 2019.

The Canonization Process Today

Why were these saints canonized in contemporary times? Well, the Vatican would prefer to canonize those who are examples of Christian life for contemporary Catholics. If the previously anticipated cases, such as that Mother Geronima de la Asuncion, were to proceed, their biographies must be presented as appealing to the contemporary times.

Who is Marguerite Bays?

Saint Marguerite Bays was a Swiss Roman Catholic member of the Secular Franciscan Order. She worked as a seamstress and also served as a catechist. She lived a simple life as a Franciscan and adapted the tenets of the Order's charism into her own life and social apostolate, especially after she was cured of cancer in 1854.

Childhood and education

Marguerite Bays's parents were devout and were farmers; she herself demonstrated great intelligence as a student and demonstrated a particular inclination towards reflection and contemplation since childhood in favor of the solitude of talking to God.

Marguerite would awaken in the morning to request the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary before going outside to do the duties of the farm. In her spare time, she would tell children about the life of Jesus. Despite the urgings of those around her, she dismissed the prospects of becoming a nun. Instead it was her desire to remain single as a virgin in order to devote herself to an austere life for Jesus Christ. But pain struck their household: a sister saw the dissolution of her marriage; a brother served a sentence in prison and the elder had a child out of the marriage of which Marguerite – then seventeen years old took care of in terms of his education. The brother married a woman of rude and indelicate character never losing the chance to humiliate and mistreat her sister-in-law. But Marguerite still took care of her nephew.

Her Prayer Life

Marguerite Bays put the greatest trust in prayer, the focus of her life, to which she had been inclined since childhood. She had deep love for Our Lady, whom she venerated by frequently reciting the Rosary and visiting her shrines. She also had immense love for Jesus in the Eucharist, before which she spent long hours in adoration. She lived constantly in God's presence. Her focus on the eternal prevented her from being distracted by the pleasures of this world or by personal advantage of any kind. God was her greatest love. She deplored human indifference to him and insistently demanded: "What can we do to love God more?" Her constant concern to be centered on God made her profoundly humble. She felt she was the lowliest of creatures and a great sinner, and fought the self-love that dampened her ardor.

Her Humility

Marguerite considered herself as a mere sinner before God. She once said "Only the soul which knows her own misery can have great confidence in God, and unless she has such knowledge, it is impossible for her to have true confidence in Him."

While at first glance, Marguerite Bays seemed to be just like anyone else, however those who came to know her were immediately struck by her humility. She always tried to stay in the background and did not want to attract attention to herself.



Banners of the saints Pope Francis officially canonized last October 13, 2019 including St. Marguerite Bays on the facade of St. Peter's Basilica. *(Photo courtesy of Vatican News)*

Service to the Poor

It was during her adolescence that some peasant farmers could no longer find work due to the introduction of mechanization in agriculture. But these troubles did not hinder her efforts to serve the poor for she carried milk and bread to them while she would also wash and mend their clothes or even give them new ones to use. Marguerite devoted part of her time teaching catechism to children and often visited those who were ill.

Her Being a Tertiary

Her devotedness to service of the poor led her to be a member of the Secular Franciscan Order. She walked a long distance to attend Mass on a frequent basis followed by a eucharistic adoration. Marguerite also embarked on pilgrimages to Marian shrines.

In 1853 she contracted cancer and begged the Mother of God to heal her through her intercession. But at the same time, she asked that her pain be linked with the suffering of Christ for her condition was her own Cross to bear. When she finally saw a doctor, it was ruled out that the sickness was incurable. On 8 December 1854 when Pope Pius IX proclaimed the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, she found that she was cured of her illness.

Vision and Prophecies and Prayers

At times, Marguerite was given to know of certain events in the future. She always sought to live continually in the presence of God. She was discrete and quiet, shunning gossip and arguments, which can easily lead to malicious rumors and slander. Without speaking very much herself, while at work she would listen and pay very close attention to the stories the women would tell concerning this or that person in town, for she cared very deeply about the conversion of sinners and the salvation of souls.

Stigmata and Death

Marguerite later discovered that she had the stigmata around 1854 and consulted with her local bishop to oversee the verification of just how authentic the stigmata were. In addition, she began to fall into ecstatic raptures when she would feel the pain of Christ once a week marking His death. But she first tried to hide the wounds from the outside world though it soon slipped out and news spread about her stigmata.

Because of the stigmata, Marguerite was subjected to a medical examination on 11 April 1873 and the doctor allowed for her niece to be present for the examination. In her last weeks, she could have just little herbal tea as well as small amounts of milk and light bread soup. Her condition had taken a rapid spiral downwards throughout Lent of 1879 and she suffered from extreme pain during this period. Marguerite grew frail and thin and her brother felt that she was like a bag of bones when he had to lift her. No one knew what her condition was for she kept silent and instead offered her pain to God; all that was known was that she suffered from acute pain in her head as well as her throat and chest. Marguerite died on 27 June 1879 following several weeks of severe suffering and her funeral June 30 saw hundreds of people attend. Her remains were later transferred sometime after her death to the parish church at Siviriez.



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DEVOTIONAL

Simbang Gabi & Popular Devotions

BY FR. ANDRES B. RAÑOA, JR., OFM

Know more about the Filipino Advent tradition and the devotions attached to it

The Church in revising its liturgical year assigns the Old Testament, especially Isaiah to determine the themes of the Advent weekday readings till December 16. From December 17 to 24 the themes are determined by the gospels. Simbang Gabi, a 9-day novena of early morning Masses, begins on December 16.

Origin

The beginnings of simbang gabi in the Philippines can be traced back to 1668, when religious missionaries brought from Mexico the practice to our country. There are a few versions of the story of its origin, but one of them is that the priests from the Spanish period agreed to hold the predawn Masses so that farmers could hear Mass before they set off to work in the fields.

Traditionally, *simbang gabi* is celebrated in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Pope Sixtus V, however, added the following intentions: (1) glorification and exaltation of the Holy Mother Church; (2) propagation of the Holy Catholic Faith; and (3) preservation of the newly baptized natives in the True Faith.

Today in the Philippines, the *simbang gabi* is celebrated "for the perseverance of the Filipino nation in the faith and the preservation of our holy religion in this part of the world." It is good to reflect on this intention at this time of challenges and disagreements. And as we attend the early morning masses, let us ask God to help heal our nation and bless the hearts of our leaders.





Photos from different OFM Parishes. *(Photos grabbed from different Facebook pages)*

Simbang Gabi Then

Simbang Gabi was held before dawn so that farmers and fisherman would be able to participate in them before the usual early start of their labor for the day. In fact, the flickering candles in the star-shaped parols or Christmas lanterns that adorned the humble houses gave light to the early-morning churchgoers on their way to Simbang Gabi.

The pre-dawn Mass was announced by the ringing of the church bells. In some rural areas, an hour before the start of Simbang Gabi, a brass band played Christmas music all over the town. It is also believed that parish priests would go far knocking on doors to wake and gather the faithful to attend the Misa de Gallo. Farmers as well as fishermen woke up early to hear the Gospel before going to their work and ask for the grace of good harvest.

In Simbang Gabi, the Spanish missionaries took the opportunity to evangelize the people. The church bells reminded them of their faith and the bells indicated when the families pray the Angelus, the rosary and the children are blessed with the sign of the cross on the forehead. Simbang Gabi, for example, was introduced to teach the people the meaning of Christmas and how to prepare for the coming of the Messiah. At the same time, it was also used to catechize the people on the meaning of the Mass. Simbang Gabi, from the onset, was a catechizing and evangelizing moment, when rich and poor, men and women, children and elderly, came together as a community waiting for the coming of the Lord and rejoicing in the promise of the Messiah.

Simbang Gabi Now

The changing of times does not break the preservation of celebrating Simbang Gabi although it is celebrated in new ways. Still, the tradition of Simbang Gabi continues. Part of it are the colorful lights and lanterns that fill every streets. Beautiful parols are hung in every window. Songs of the season are played everywhere to warm the hearts. Families, friends and even individuals find its way going to the nearest church to attend the nine-day novena. Shortly after the misa de gallo, families gather in their homes to celebrate Noche Buena and feasted on various delicacies like queso de bola, bibingka, puto bungbong, or a drink of salabat or hot chocolate.

As generations passed, and especially during the period of the Spanish American War at the turn of the 19th century when church leadership in the Philippines was in a vacuum, Simbang Gabi continued to be celebrated but without the accompanying catechesis. It soon became a cultural tradition during Christmas season where social festivities and "salu-salo" gained more prominence. The religious meaning got relegated to the background as people went to church not so much to prepare themselves spiritually for the coming of Christ, but to meet families and friends, boy friends and girl friends and socialize after Mass. This was how Simbang Gabi became a form of popular religiosity.



> "The changing of times does not break the preservation of celebrating *Simbang Gabi* although it is celebrated in new ways. Still, the tradition of *Simbang Gabi* continues...

The First Plenary Council of the Philippines in 1953 made a formal petition to Rome to continue with the Simbang Gabi. The Papal Indult approved with the following conditions: The nine days preceding the Nativity of our Lord starts on December 16, with solemn votive Mass, but only once a day with great solemnity and with a big attendance of the faithful. On March 24, 1961, Rome granted the continuation of this Indult for five years. Since then, everywhere in the Philippines, the Simbang Gabi or Misa del Gallo is celebrated with great solemnity. Liturgically, the practice of Simbang Gabi is a Mass celebrated early in the morning in honor of the Virgin Mary in which the interplay of light and darkness convey the meaning of Advent.

Misa de Gallo has brought back to the people's consciousness the original meaning of the celebration with Vatican II, and examined it in the context of modern times and needs of modern society. As a result, some churches in metropolitan areas begin to celebrate the Masses in the evening, to allow more people to participate in the novena. Thus, Misa de Gallo became more popularly known as Simbang Gabi. Today, whether the novena of advent Masses is celebrated traditionally at dawn or in the early evening, it is still called Simbang Gabi.

The people can be so demanding without doing their part in promoting and supporting vocations to the priesthood. Having many simbang gabi in different barangay chapels is taxing to the priest who may have to say more than two Masses a day. Church legislation allows a maximum of two Masses per day and 3 Masses n Sunday. More than that is illicit.



"Pag-Oo" ritual at the Our Lady of the Nativity Parish in Pangil, Laguna *(Photo courtesy of La Sagrada Expedición)*

Popular Devotion During the Simbang Gabi

In Pangil, a town in Laguna, there is the nine day devotion popularly called "Pag Oó." The name is derived from the "O" Antiphons in Latin which we sing in O Come, o Come Emmanuel. The Church designates December 17-24 (Mass) or December 17-23 (Liturgy of the Hours) for the poetic "O Antiphons" in preparation for the Solemnity of the Nativity. These famous "O antiphons" embellish the Magnificat during the Liturgy of the Hours, and simultaneously serve as the alleluia during the celebration of Mass. With expectant Mary, we await the holy birth of Christ in our own lives. We pray that the Word will be born in us and brought into the world.

The arrival of the Devotion in Pangil

Sometime in 1724, Prince Carlos, the son of King Philip V of Spain was exiled from his country for his alleged misdeeds and was exiled for more than 3 years in the Philippines. The young prince stayed in the Franciscan convent of Pangil Church. In 1728, the King lifted the order and directed the Prince to return to their kingdom. Upon the prince's ascension to the throne of Spain as King Charles III in 1759, he sent the images of Nuestra Señora dela O and Sto. Niño dela O to the people in Pangil in gratitude for their hospitality.

In the wrong town, the emissaries tried to deliver the images, but they could not move them. However, when they arrived at Pangil, they had no trouble lifting them and a safe delivery ensued. The menfolk of the town, wearing their traditional headdresses or bandanas, together with the other inhabitants joyously welcomed the images. The original image of Nuestra Señora de la O, however was destroyed during the Second World War yet the Niño was kept safely. Years later, a replacement image of the Virgin was immediately commissioned that can still be seen and venerated up to this day.

The devotion

Since the arrival of the Mother and Child image, numerous miracles were attributed to their intercession that is still happening up to this day. The people hold a nine-day novena every year to honor the Blessed Mother and Her Child.

THE FOLLOWING IS THE PRESENT SEQUENCE OF THE "O ANTIPHONS" AT MASS

December

17: Come, Wisdom (*Sapientia*) of our God Most High, guiding creation with power and love: teach us to walk in the paths of knowledge.

18: O Leader (*Dux*) of the house of Israel, giver of the Law to Moses on Sinai: come to rescue us with your mighty power!

19: O Root (*Radix*) of Jesse's stem, sign of God's love for all his people: come to save us without delay!

20: O Key (*Clavis*) of David, opening the gates of God's eternal Kingdom: come and free the prisoners of darkness!

21: O Emmanuel (*Emmanuel*), our King and Giver of Law: come to save us, Lord our God!

22 and 23: O King (*Rex*) of all nations and keystone of the Church: come and save man, whom you formed from the dust!

24: O Radiant Dawn (*Oriens*), splendor of eternal light, sun of justice: come and shine on those who dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death.

Devotion Nuestra Señora de La "O"

The first devotion is in honor of the Virgin Mary from December 9 to 17. Here the Virgin is presented in her pregnant status and ready to give birth to Jesus. She is called Nuestra Señora de La "O." in honor of the preceding O antiphons at Mass and at the Liturgy of the Hours. The novena prayers are found in the website of Pangil Catholic Church. A solemn procession in honor of Virgen dela O culminates every December 18.

Devotion Sto Niño de La "O"

December 16-24 is devoted to Sto. Niño dela O. This second devotion eclipses the devotion to Mary. The statue of the Child Jesus in on a long pole and encircled by the "O" shape medallion.

The singing and jiggling for the Sto. Niño dela O, known as "Pag-Oo" is held twice a day. The first is held in the morning after the Misa de Gallo and the other is held in the afternoon. Parents from neighboring towns also bring their children to the novena wearing their Bandana.

The song of the novena is presumed to imitate the lullaby of the pregnant mother, Nuestra Señora de La O to comfort her son, Sto. Niño de La O who was in her womb. But the lyrics in Latin are actually an example of a catechism used by the missionaries in the evangelizing the people through popular devotion. The chant is accompanied by a single drum or tambol.



The Twelve Days of Christmas may be a contemporary sample of how the catechism is organized. The previous stanza is added to the next stanza. In Twelve Days of Christmas after Five Golden Rings, then the recap follows: Four calling birds, three French hen, two turtle doves and a partridge in a pear tree.

The chant's every stanza begins with "Dic mihi" which means "tell me"

I

Which is one (Jesus the son of God)

II

Which are two (Tablets of Moses). The recap One is Jesus Son of God.

III

Which are three (Patriacrch: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob). The recap Two Tablets of Moses. One is Jesus.

IV

Which are four

Then the drum stops and a prayer is said, popularly termed Oremus.

Then begins again from I till XII.

Every year, many families vie for the honor to be the sponsor of the Sto. Niño de La O novena. A young son or daughter in the family is usually given the privilege to carry the Sto. Niño de La O. This is their way of showing their gratitude and appreciation to the Lord for the blessings given them as a family.

The devotion to Nuestra Señora de la O and Santo Niño de la O continues to grow strong and becoming popular in the country due to its unique image, history and tradition that surrounds it. Through this devotion, we are able to meditate in a different way the mystery of the Incarnation, the Word made flesh.

And who better than Mary to show us how to expect Jesus' coming? She who, in the penetrating phrase of Saint Augustine, "conceived Christ in her mind before conceiving Him in her body," is the perfect model of holy "great expectations."

Bandana Festival in honor of Virgen Expectación, Nuestra Señora dela O. The image of the Virgen and the Niño. *(Photo courtesy of La Sagrada Expedición)*

MISSION & EVANGELIZATION

Overcoming hatred in the name of God

BY PONCIANO M. MACABALO, OFM

A friar reflects on his grace-filled experiences of Interreligious Dialogue





Photos of the meeting of Interreligious dialogue in Rome in 1995. *(Photos courtesy of Ponciano M. Macabalo, OFM)*

The significant experience I had in the area of Interreligious Dialogue was in Syria during the meeting of the Commission on Friars Working among the Muslim. The event was organized by the chairperson Fra Francoise Paquette, OFM, of the Canadian Province (St. Joseph) and was held in Damascus sometime in 1994. The venue was the oratory of the Church managed by the friars: Memorial of St. Paul dedicated to the conversion event of Saint Paul the Apostle.

The Secretary General for Missionary Evangelization, Fr. James Perluzzi, OFM, sent me to that meeting because he was then seriously ill. Using Vatican passport, I entered the country with some apprehensions and amazement at the same time in that predominantly Muslim country. The friars working among the Muslim who came for that meeting were from Canada, France, Syria, Lebanon, Pakistan, Italy and Libya. Bishop Georgio Bertin, ofm, Apostolic Vicar of Somalia was one of the presenters.

I found Syria ideal for that meeting because of the peaceful coexistence among Muslims, Christians and other religious denominations in the country. I can still see in my mind the thickly-populated Damascus and neighboring vicinities, people all over the place and fully-loaded public transports. We visited our church in Aleppo where I met some Filipino workers active in the church. In recent years, I felt the horror of the devastating war that fell on those beautiful people. I have great admiration for friars who remained in the country in solidarity with their people.

Our friars in Syria are well connected with the people because of the existence of the Order in that country for centuries. Some of them are Syrians who were expected to follow Muslim tradition. Being Catholic and Franciscans were not easy for them. The friendly relation of friars with the Muslim leadership in their daily dialogue of life enables us to have a pleasant encounter with the community during their Friday Prayer. It was an overwhelming feeling for fourteen of us, friars in our brown habit walking in the aisle of thousands of men sitting on the floor. The enthusiastic clapping of hands as the Imam/Mufti welcomed us in their midst made us feel at home especially when they gave us earphone to hear the translation of the message of speaker. The experience of that day was unbelievable. Looking back, I can't believe that the recent war has wiped out the Friday prayer of people in that place forever.

The succeeding meetings of the Commission I attended were held in Rome in 1997 and in Sarajevo in 1998. I was happy to witness the participation of the representatives of Philippine province in that gathering where they share their joyful and challenging experiences in the field. We were all uplifted by our encounter with John Paul II at Castle Gandolfo. The great Pontiff appreciated our efforts in the area of Interreligious dialogue. The gathering in Sarajevo in 1998 exposed us to the scars of war and the challenges in healing and in unifying the people from their horrible traumas. The efforts in the Interreligious Dialogue promoting collaboration was a key in addressing the immense needs of the people.

Reflecting on the experience, I cannot help but remember my visit to the friars living among the Muslim in Balo-i and Basilan before the atrocious activities of Abu Sayyaf. The Postulants we sent there for their vocation discernment had rich and colorful stories to tell. I saw in the missionary ministry of the friars hope for us to be united as Filipinos overcoming differences in religious belief. Inspired by St. Francis, our respectful presence among the Muslim in dialogue with them in different ways is bearing fruits. The setback of this effort is the radicalization of Islam and the terroristic events that rock the world with ripple effect causing incredible troubles and uncertainties in many parts of the world including the Philippines.

> "With those grace-filled experiences in the field of *Interreligious dialogue* I considered beautiful, stressful and unforgettable, I learned a lot from our Friars...

My short stay in Libya: in Tripoli, Misurata, Sirte and Ras Lanuff where I rendered religious service among the Filipino migrant workers in 1991 and 1993 was also part of memorable experience in the Muslim world. I encountered lots of stress during my stay in that country, but they very were small compared to the horror of violence that our Filipino friars endured in their mission ministry during and after the revolution.

With those grace-filled experiences in the field of Interreligious dialogue that I considered beautiful, stressful and unforgettable, I learned a lot from our Friars, and I admired them for their courage and perseverance being respectful, tolerant and fraternal towards our Muslim brothers and Sisters. I am perplexed in the rise of radical Islam afflicting our present world. I pray that the Interreligious dialogue ministry will bear fruit of Peace and harmony all over the world overcoming violence and division in the name of God.



Christmas in the Foreign Mission-Libya

BY AMADO M. BARANQUEL, OFM

The spirit of Christmas in a predominantly Muslim country

Through the years, despite the political situation in Libya, influx of foreign workers keep rising. However, the number continuously go down since 2011 due to the Arab uprising in the neighboring countries which influenced Libya to have its own revolution. Eight years has passed since the anti-Kadaffi revolution and Libya is still battling towards stability. For foreign workers, like the Filipinos, this not only affects their jobs but also their freedom to exercise their Catholic faith and important events like celebrating Christmas.

The Christian Catholic mission in Libya is headed by the **Order of Friars Minor *(OFM-Franciscans)***. Our Order has been in Libya since 1643. Through the years, we have been serving the Roman Catholic community comprising mostly of foreign workers from Asia, Subsaharan countries, Europe, and a few from America. The big number of Roman Catholics are our OFWs-Overseas Filipino Workers. Being a Filipino myself, and a friar, has encouraged and challenged me to remain in this mission. The other Filipino friars have returned home to assume their new assignments in the Philippines

I have been in Libya for more than 20 years now travelling from east to west, from north to south, reaching out to Christian Catholics. With me is another friar, Fr. Peter, a Polish, who also serves the Roman Catholic community in the Cyrene area. We take turns in serving the Catholic community mostly in east Libya. The rest of the friar missionaries from India, Philippines and Poland left during the revolution. Among the Congregation of Nuns only that of Mother Teresa opted to remain.

Serving in a predominantly Muslim country, I would say, is a real mission in itself. Most of the Christian Catholics work in hospitals, oil companies, schools and universities. They attend Mass especially on Fridays, the same day as the Libyans go for their regular Friday prayers. Those who are off duty on Sundays do attend Sunday Mass, as we know, this is the day of the Lord for Roman Catholics. Despite the dominant Islam faith in Libya, we are still lucky that we can still exercise our freedom of religion, although not always. There is still some discrimination. We've heard of many stories of Christians being attacked at times, shouted at or ridiculed just because they are different. On the contrary, there are also stories where our belief is respected. They let them do our prayers and celebrate religious events like Christmas.

> “It is heartwarming to know that when these Libyans get educated about other cultures and beliefs, they are more *accepting* and *understanding*.

Celebrating Christmas in Libya is allowed but with restrictions. In some parts of the country, it is totally prohibited. Traditionally, in the Philippines, Christmas season starts in September. They say that when the 'ber' months start, Christmas spirit also begins. One can see Christmas decorations in homes and public places. Christmas songs can be heard being played. In Libya, Christians, like the Filipinos may opt to decorate their flats or houses but only from the inside. The church will also be decorated from the inside specifically, the Nativity scene (crib) is displayed to remind us of the birth of Jesus Christ, our Savior. While the Catholic community may celebrate Christmas, they still feel that their every move is being watched. There are Libyans who are curious of what Catholics do during Christmas so we invite them to attend our Christmas festivities. There they see that we do our prayers the same way that they do theirs then eating and socialization afterwards. It is heartwarming to know that when these Libyans get educated about other cultures and beliefs, they are more accepting and understanding. In fact, they come again and again to celebrate with their Filipino friends. Many of them are now aware that 25th December is one of our special days. While Libyans do not share the belief that Jesus is God, some of them do respect our Christian Catholic belief.

One of the highlights of our Christmas celebration is the traditional **Candle Light Service**. Our parishioners from the various nationalities organize themselves and prepare one Christmas carol sang in their language and one in English. This is done in one Friday before the 25th of December. Other Christian denomination are also invited to sing in choirs. It is a beautiful display of ecumenical spirit. During Christmas season, some of our school children and altar servers go to handicapped centers, which is taken cared by the Missionary Sisters of Charity (MSC), to sing Christmas carols to them.

Another event that we do during the Christmas season is the ***Misa de Gallo*** or ***Simbang Gabi***, as we say it in Filipino. It was in December 1995 when *Simbang Gabi* began to be celebrated every year, after consultation and approval from then Bishop Giovanni Martinelli, OFM. The cold winter season render it hard to celebrate dawn Mass or *Misa de Gallo*. *Simbang Gabi* begins on the eve of the 15th of December, and ends up on the eve of the 23rd so as not to overlap with the 24th midnight Mass. Since the February 2011 revolution until now, we have been advised to limit our movement for security reasons. Only the Catholic communities in the city centers of Tripoli, Benghazi and Beida (Cyrene) are able to celebrate Christmas Mass. Our Christmas celebration in Libya is truly humble and a simple one that reflects the serene joy and peace of the first Christmas in Bethlehem sans the trappings of commercialism. And may the spirit of joy and peace that Christmas brings reign in this troubled land.



Christmas celebration in Libya *(Photos courtesy of Amado Baranquel, OFM)*



VOCATION STORY

"The Time Is Now": A Franciscan Vocation Story

BY ROBERT B. MANANSALA OFM

The discovery of St. Francis of Assisi and the Franciscan way of life

My awareness of God started in a religious environment that was specifically provided by my maternal grandmother Paz Balingit during my childhood days in Macabebe, Pampanga.

My grandmother Paz, who had originally wanted to be a nun prior to meeting my grandfather Jose, was very holy, prayerful, religious and loving. Every night, she would gather the entire extended family in a big room to pray, particularly the Rosary. After prayer, we would share stories of the day until we were ready to sleep. That early, my vertical relationship with God became intimately connected to my horizontal relationships with others, beginning with family members.

My initial awareness of God was also intimately connected to my priestly and religious vocation. My relatives tell me now that even as a young kid, way before my school days, I was already telling everyone that I would be a priest someday. I do not exactly know where and how I got the idea. All I can say is that the desire must have been planted by God through the example and intercessions of my maternal grandmother who had been praying, I came to learn later, for a priest and religious vocation in the family.

Three significant experiences during my elementary years enhanced my awareness of God and deepened my relationship with God: my First Communion, my involvement in the Legion of Mary, and my membership with the Knights of the Altar of our parish. My First Communion was a truly overwhelming moment for me. I felt so happy to have received the Eucharistic Lord for the first time in the company of many students. My participation in the Legion of Mary was instrumental in intensifying my knowledge of and relationship with the Blessed Virgin Mary, not only as the Mother of Jesus but as our Mother as well, a connection that was initially influenced by my maternal grandmother. My membership in the Knights of the Altar provided a lot of unforgettable experiences of God's love and peace while serving in the church, of the fun-filled company of other young altar servers and some elders responsible for our group, of the energetic, service-oriented and kind example of the assistant parish priest, and of many wonderful parish activities. All of these made a great impact on me as a young boy. At an early age, I found myself being drawn to attend and serve at the Eucharistic celebration practically everyday. The desire to become a priest was slowly growing in me.

I was in my first year in high school at the then Assumption College in San Fernando, Pampanga when I decided to enter the seminary. As our religion teacher, a Dominican sister, Sr. Arsenia Puno, OP, was discussing about priestly and religious vocations in class, I felt in my heart a blazing desire to become a priest. Immediately after class, I approached the Dominican sister and told her that I wanted to become a priest. The following year, I was accepted at the Mother of Good Counsel Seminary, only a minor seminary then of the former Diocese of San Fernando (Pampanga).

My years at the said minor seminary were characterized by a life of intense prayer, keen discipline, rigorous study and youthful idealism. The youthful idealism for holiness was inculcated in many different ways. Our seminary rector, Fr. Paciano Aniceto (before he became a Bishop and then Archbishop), was an outstanding example of holiness and priestly zeal. I observed how very prayerful, simple and kind he was. Fr. Honesto Ongtioco (now Bishop Honesto Ongtioco of the Diocese of Cubao), who succeeded Fr. Paciano Aniceto, was an exemplary priestly model too. I also remember reading many books on the lives of saints during those years. I likewise became a member of a circle of seminarians, from different year levels, who really wanted to become good seminarians. Our group did not mind the other seminarians who were making fun of us for trying to keep our youthful religious idealism.

> "I found *St. Francis of Assisi* as a man absorbed by the love of God in Jesus Christ and the Gospel. He passionately loved God and everyone, including other creatures.

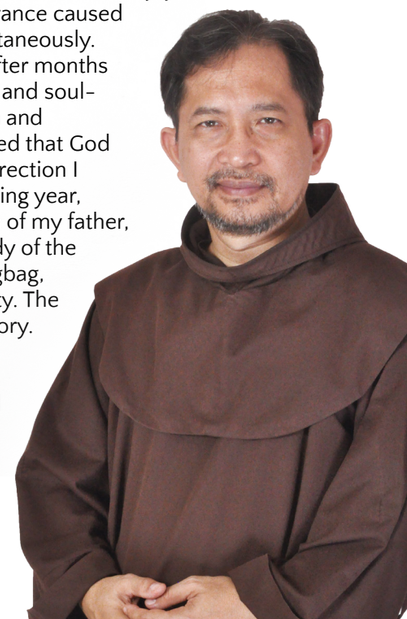
In my younger years, all I wanted was to become a priest. I had no idea about religious life then. In my last year in the minor seminary, however, I discovered St. Francis of Assisi and the Franciscan way of life. My calling to the Franciscan religious life took place in the context of an illness.

During the course of my sickness, I requested one of my classmates to get me a book to accompany me in my solitude. I did not specify any saint but my classmate brought me a book on St. Francis of Assisi. Alone in the big dormitory of the seminary, while battling an illness, I read the said book on St. Francis of Assisi for three days. I "ate" the book – from cover to cover! As I devoured the book, I found myself crying unabashedly, moved by the great and holy example of the saint. I found St. Francis of Assisi as a man absorbed by the love of God in Jesus Christ and the Gospel. He passionately loved God and everyone, including other creatures. He experienced freedom and peace that only God could give, as well as the freedom of poverty and simplicity. He imitated the poor Jesus not only by being poor himself but also by being in solidarity with the poor. Then I heard a voice within me that said, "This is what I want. This is how I long to live."

But that initial experience with St. Francis of Assisi had to be discerned further and needed to be confirmed. The succeeding months were months of confusion and uncertainty. The seminary priests were not supportive of my desire to become a Franciscan because they wanted me to become a diocesan priest. My father Nicasio Manansala, who had been against my entering a diocesan seminary, was completely objecting. But I was so convinced that even if many were against it, the words of St. Gabriel of Our Lady of Sorrows, one of my favorite saints, reverberated in my heart: "The time is now." I was blessed to be consulting a parish priest who guided me in my discernment and to have the unqualified support of my mother Lydia Manansala for whatever final decision I would take.

God gave me confirmation of my Franciscan calling by way of an experience that has continued to be one of my sources of assurance in moments of doubts and difficulties. The incident happened in the library of the seminary where I was then the student librarian. Part of my duties was to clean the library in the afternoon.

One afternoon, after playing basketball with the other seminarians, I entered the library to clean it. I saw a very large dictionary sitting on some kind of a lectern or a book stand. I randomly opened the dictionary without any intention of doing some kind of a Bible-cutting. Lo and behold, it opened on the page where the word "Franciscan" was written on top! This caught my attention, and I just felt my heart welling up with warmth, joy and peace. God's assurance caused tears of joy to fall spontaneously. Right there and then, after months of prayer, discernment and soul-searching, of confusion and anguish, I was convinced that God confirmed to me the direction I was to take. The following year, without the knowledge of my father, I applied at the Our Lady of the Angels Seminary in Bagbag, Novaliches, Quezon City. The rest, as they say, is history. To date, I have been a Franciscan for more than 31 years. May God grant me many more years in this vocation He laid out for me.



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THE OLAS BEAT VOLUME

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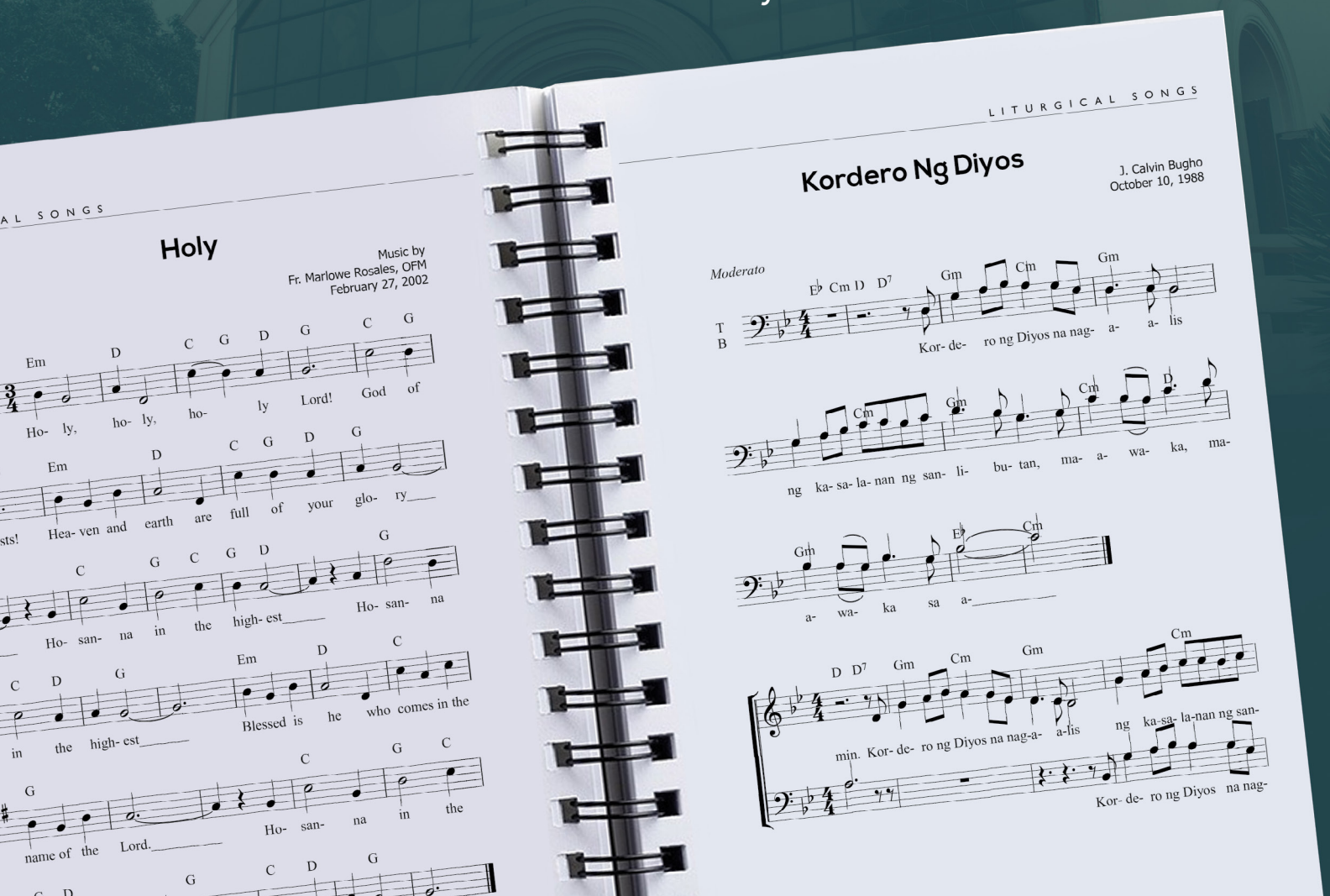
on Libreria de San Antonio Store
at 69 San Pedro Bautista St., Frisco,
Quezon City

