

Letter from Cebu

Celebrating 100 years of Bro Charles, a witness of Jesus and his Gospel
Asian Assembly 2016 - July 15-22, 2016

In the centenary year of the martyrdom of Blessed Charles de Foucauld (1916-2016), we, the 57 participants came together in Cebu City - Philippines. Our Assembly was composed of Priests, Little Sisters of Jesus, Little Brothers and Members of the Lay Fraternity.

We came from 6 Asian Countries (South Korea, Myanmar, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and the Philippines). We were blessed with the presence of our International Responsible, Fr. Aurelio Sanz Baeza of Spain, a member of the International Council, Fr Emmanuel Asi of Pakistan, Cardinal Gaudencio Rosales, a founding member of the Philippine Fraternity, Archbishop Angel Lagdameo of Iloilo and Archbishop Jose Palma of Cebu.

We send you greetings of fraternal joy. We are specially happy and grateful to the Spirit who gathered the Spiritual Family of Bro. Charles for the first time with our Lay Fraternity Members and the strong presence of our Korean brothers – 11 young, enthusiastic priests!

We are grateful for the gift of Bro. Charles whose martyrdom we remembered with renewed spirit and hope for our fraternities all over the world. We celebrated Bro Charles, who as a witness to Jesus and his gospel, simply “steps forward, states his name and then steps back because he is not the message” (from a talk given by Little Sister Kathleen in Montreal in 2016).

The beauty and significance of the place

We gathered in the beautiful and historic place of Cebu, the seat of Christianity in the Philippines where in 1521, Magellan and his men, together with some Friars landed in search of spices. The natives welcomed the visitors. Following their leader, Rajah Jumabon and the Queen who accepted the faith, the natives received baptism and as a reward, the Queen received the image of the *Santo Nino* (image of the infant Jesus) whose devotion is synonymous with Christianity in the southern Philippines.

Nestling on a hill with a good panoramic view of the city of Cebu, *House of Silence* is a Retreat House on a 6-hectare hilly land managed by the *Franciscan Sisters Pro Infante et Familia*. It is not only a House of Silence but a house of awe and wonder at the beauty of Cebu city from afar with matching fruit-bearing trees planted all over the place. It was a joy to pick *Avocados* during our manualia. We also enjoyed fresh herb-combo drinks at mealtime.

Coming from parish exposures, the airport and the pier, we all converged on the 18th of July at the Archbishop's Residence for a continental lunch warmly hosted by Archbishop Jose Palma after which we moved to the House of Silence and settled down.

As we unpacked our bags, we also unpacked ourselves to each other in Introduction Session. We felt the fraternal welcome and it is in the same spirit that we celebrated the Opening Liturgy with Archbishop Jose Palma of Cebu presiding.

In this five-day Asian Assembly, we always started the day with an Hour of Adoration to the Blessed Sacrament and ended the day with the Holy Eucharist. We continued with the usual practice of the fraternity – *Lectio Divina*, Review of Life, *Manualia*, dishwashing, socializing and Desert Day. It was suggested not to bring any book or pen or anything unnecessary in our Desert Day and meet the God who is always in search of us in our abject poverty. The day in the desert was a special grace for most of the participants. Many discovered the need to face the contradictions in our own life. Very often, what we say sometimes contradicts how we live.

Nazareth, Universal Brotherhood and the gift of Brother Charles' Martyrdom

We listened to the presentations of Fr. Aurelio and Fr. Asi. Fr. Aurelio encouraged us to feel the pulse of our brothers and sisters and open ourselves to allow God to find us where we are; that membership in the fraternity is not membership to a religious group although we are the fourth largest group of priests (4,500) in terms of membership after the Jesuits, Franciscans and the Salesians but to a movement, a way of being universal brothers founded on empathy, listening, transparency, respect and self-giving. He further said that the challenge of Bro Charles to our Church today is how to live Nazareth.

Fr. Emmanuel Asi spoke about the Grace of the Martyrdom of Bro. Charles. Fr Asi emphasized that martyrdom is not one single event but an evolutionary process of dying to self until it is culminated in the final act of self-giving. He challenged us that in our Asian context, we need to rediscover the meaning of martyrdom today. We have to reach out to each human family in Asia and to live out “Universal Brotherhood” in the mind and spirit of Blessed Charles. This is our Asian way of celebrating the 100 years of Charles de Foucauld, a witness to Jesus and his Gospel.

Gifts, Realities and Challenges of the Fraternities in Asia

We listened to the reports from the different Asian countries and from Little Sisters, Little Brothers and Members of Lay Fraternity about the realities and challenges we are facing. Our Asian Assembly this year was unique in having representatives from priests, sisters, brothers and lay people. We celebrate the gifts of Missionaries founding fraternities, the inspiring presence of Little Brothers and Little Sisters to our local fraternities, the witness and fidelity of old members, the enthusiasm of the young members, old members reuniting with other members, of being a minority and of the gift of Asian contemplative spirit in doing mission.

We see the reality of the Paschal Mystery (dying and coming back to life) and the vulnerability of our Fraternities, of members lukewarm, divided by distance, not faithful to monthly meetings, of the poor quality of our monthly meetings, not doing the Review of Life faithfully, of local fraternities perceived as elite group, (the bishop's inner circle), of using the Fraternity as passport to travel abroad for free, members in crisis feeling not supported by brothers, fraternity reduced as “mutual affirmation club.” We are challenged to:

- First, strengthen our local fraternity as a support system, especially through fraternal visits and being available to brothers in crisis;
- Second, to deepen the quality of our sharing by honestly doing the review of life in the desert;

- Third, to discover, uncover and recover the Asian face of the fraternity by constantly going back to the core of our being – following Jesus of Nazareth through Bro. Charles– as we constantly live the paradox of Gospel in dialogue with culture;
- Fourth, to make our fraternities more life-giving by always referring ourselves to the directory as our guide to practice Nazareth, universal brotherhood, simplicity of life and to even critique our lifestyles that are counter to them.

In the course of our business meeting, Fr Arthur Charles, our Asian Responsible, while thanking his previous councillors, announced two new councillors, namely; Fr. Prakash Sagili from India and Fr. Philipp Yon from South Korea.

We look forward to the future with renewed enthusiasm and hope as we venture on the following:

- Week of Spirituality in Pakistan in November 2017
- Month of Nazareth in the Philippines in July 2018
- Asian Assembly in Korea in October 2019 and
- World Assembly in Bangalore, India in January 2019.

The Assembly ended (or began) on the Feast Day of Mary Magdalene, the Apostle to the Apostles. We went home bringing with us Jesus' command to Mary, "go and tell the brothers." With Mary's joyful enthusiasm, we can only tell you what we see - Jesus and his Gospel is very much alive in our fraternities and that we are invited to be universal brothers in the spirit of our very own Bro Charles de Foucauld.

From
Sisters and Brothers of Asian Assembly
Friday, July 22, 2016