

International meeting of the responsables for the Jesus Caritas priest fraternity in Cebu, second half of January 2019

After a tiring journey (you can't deny your age!), we, Helmut dean of Eupen, represented the French-speaking priest-frat and I, the Flemish priest-frat, arrived at the small airport of Cebu City (Philippines) in the afternoon of 15 January. . We were welcomed by Filipino brothers and a seminarist who brought us along with 6 other participants in a van from the archbishop and a taxi to the beautiful house Talavera on a hill, just outside the center of Cebu City. During the rush hour, the young bus driver staggered between a tangle of traffic with cyclists, pedestrians, motorbikes, overloaded vans, tricycles, sidecar motorcycles, passenger cars,... and brought us safely to Talavera after an hour and a half. I have never been in such a witch-boiler traffic. With over 900,000 inhabitants, Cebu is a very important commercial city, an island located just south of the center of the Philippines. The country is an island of more than 7000 (small) islands, of which 2000 are inhabited. For me it was a first introduction to a "third world country". Apart from Israel



and Tamanrasset, I had never been outside of Europe. Immediately noticeable was the modern city with its tall buildings, luxurious supermarkets, but also a lot of small, poor shops along the main roads, hundreds of people on foot, overloaded vans and taxis and a lot of young people ... A different world with a 'heavy' tropical climate at 27-30 degrees (luckily we were in the Philippines during the winter months!)

After a short welcome we were allowed to visit our "sleeping place". There was nothing left of the rooms but two dorms. With two Brazilian priests, Helmut and I, we had a spacious dormitory, air-cooled. In retrospect, this was a better solution than that we would be housed in a single room. There was "light and space." When you had to get up at night, it was comforting to notice that Carlos could not sleep either and the emails were answering on his tablet! Only in the morning when we had to get up was it less pleasant, because just around the morning the tiredness and the willingness to sleep struck ... I did not sleep much during the first week (and afterwards ...).

Getting home in "who is who?" ...

This international meeting of more than two weeks in the Philippines was a first for me. I had experienced European meetings much earlier and two years ago. I have always experienced it as very uplifting and each time these encounters brought personal contacts with one or the other fratpriest from another country. That is how I came to experience a Nazareth month a second time in Tyrol and a third time in Ireland. The global meeting is even more radical. Already in terms of coming home to "who is who?" of the 46 participants from the 23 different countries. That



already takes a week. It is also true that you are immediately confronted with people from countries where you know the existence and about the location, but who are otherwise completely unknown to you. I brought a small atlas with maps of all countries of the world and it came in very handy. Because the two Brazilian brothers who were also in our dormitory, Carlos and Didi(er) live in that immense country a few hundred kilometers apart. The atlas came in handy in presenting the church and the fraternity of the various countries.

Introduction to a living Filipino folk church

In the Philippines I have met a living and very hospitable church. The country that has more than 9x the surface of Belgium, has more than 105 million inhabitants. Almost 85% of these were baptized Roman Catholic. More than 5% are Muslims, especially in the south, on the island of Mindanao. The Catholic faith in a big city like Cebu is just part of life. It is experienced as a matter of course in the Sunday celebration by young and old together. Priests are valued as important people. There are dozens of teenage boys who are altar boys. Excited songs and vocals supported by musical instruments and choir, make the celebrations very lively.

Especially when you notice how the celebrant manages to animate the homily in a folk, simple way in dialogue with his people. We were able to experience it that way during the weekends. In Santa Cruz, the poorer parish church where we were four in the morning, we were warmly welcomed and introduced. After the Eucharist, a baptismal catechesis followed by laity to proud, festively dressed young parents on the occasion of the baptism of their child. There were no fewer than 32 baptisms, one of which was a child of seven, the rest babies. After the celebration they went to take a photo at the statue of Santo Nino (The Holy Child Jesus, comparable to the Child Jesus of Prague) and thought it was great to be in the photo with a guest priest. Parents and children came to us to be blessed. Simply by stroking the back of your hand over the forehead, people knew that God was blessed through the priest. Shortly after noon there was another full church with boys and girls from



12 to 17 years, colorfully dressed and the face painted somewhat. I suspect this was on the occasion of the big party of Santo Nino. The young people were gathered there for the formation of faith and for their own youth celebration preceded by a Salesian who also mainly focused on the young people there. The parish is supported by the parish council that meets every month on Sunday, and by a priest, a young man in his fifties, surrounded by 2-3 women who ensure that people can live and eat in the open, hospitable parish house. Here there is no danger that the priest will be lonely.

Precisely that Sunday there was parish council and we were invited to be there for a while, of course with the usual photo to say goodbye.



Feast of Santo Nino

We found that our international meeting took place on the Sunday in January at which the major religious celebration took place in the streets and in the parishes of Cebu in honor of the Holy Child Jesus (Santo Nino). We were immersed in a crowd of thousands of people singing in the street and praying the rosary, waving their hands. At the

chorus of an ever-recurring song in honor of Santo Nino, hundreds raised the statue of the "Little Jesus" that many of them carry. The highlight of the celebration was the Eucharistic celebration with a few thousand on Saturday evening on the large square decorated with countless flags in front of the Basilica Minor Santo Nino. The Eucharist was preceded by the Archbishop and dozens of priests. We were received there as guests of honor and one after the other we were invited to dance with the image of Santo Nino to recurring music. An incredible spectacle that lasted for three-quarters of an hour. You can experience something with it and taste the atmosphere there was at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nH8BmiPrpis>. Santo Nino is the people's church at its best.

We could fully experience that the next day. We were invited as a group in Borbon to take part in a festive Eucharistic celebration on the occasion of San Sebastiao (patron saint of the church) and Santo Nino, followed by a nice meal on the terrace of the parsonage. In the afternoon, an overwhelming feast of dancing warriors, with flags and changing scenery, had a swirlingly colorful whole that lasted for a few hours and left an unforgettable impression. Dozens of groups participated in the competition with the same dance, but with different costumes and sets: a wonderful cultural-folkloric performance. All that on a square the size of a soccer field with hundreds of spectators around it.



World fraternity: "How good it is to be together with brothers."

It struck me that many priests in the fraternity present there have made the service to the "poor" their preferred option. They work in prison pastoral care, in basic groups, in clinics with special attention for the poorest, with lonely elderly people, etc. The figure of Charles de Foucauld means for them: no power, but presence; no intrusive conversions, but "shouting the gospel through life"; do not build walls between peoples, but seek to live a friendship with Muslims as Christians. At the wish for peace during one of the celebrations we held together, a Filipino priest came to thank me that Flemish missionaries whom he named by name had brought them the Christian faith. The 86-year-old Mariano from Chile, a truly prophetic figure, formerly internationally responsible and many years as a priest-worker, really wanted to be there to pass on his charisma to the fraternity, with an unimaginably positive attitude. On his arrival, he had heart failure, which immediately meant that he was hospitalized for two days



in a Catholic hospital in Cebu. All that time a Filipino brother stayed with him until they came to Talavera the third day. It is really remarkable how hospitable and meticulous the Filipino brothers have prepared for this international meeting and how they have put their full commitment into it. Many thanks for that! Mariano brought along a nice, colorful poster made by a basic group from Chile: "Bienvenido Francisco, papa del pueblo", designed during the Pope's recent visit to Chile in February 2018.

Jean from Burkina Faso told me about his efforts as a priest and nurse for better medical care, especially with the poor in Dedougou. Jean-François (France), on the other hand, thought that the European church was portrayed too negatively in the European report. Secularization in our regions is not only an obstacle to the experience of the gospel, but also a new opportunity to bring its own and the liberating of it in a new way: going to its core and to those who live on the periphery .

There were many beautiful moments of praying together, but also of fraternizing with a living celebration of the Eucharist, a nice buffet, singing and dancing on an evening with the Filipino brothers who meet each other every six months. In the morning after the morning prayer in three groups (per language) Didi and his guitar arrived early to treat us to a cheerful song at the entrance of the restaurant. Unforgettable was the day off during the second week where we drove in two vans to Lapu-lapu. At that place, Lapu-Lapu, the local chief of Mactan Island, defeated the fleet of Spanish occupiers with Ferdinand Magellan. We visited his statue and a reminder plate of Magellan's death on April 27, 1521.



Then we went to the catamaran where we scattered the sea on two boats. After an hour of sailing, it was possible to swim in water that had 25 °. In the meantime, we could have had our picnic with the typical "suckling pig" that is present at party times. The singing, the joy of living, the teasing of each other swimming: it made that day an unforgettable moment of brotherly being together. A welcome break during the intense days with discussions and contacts in different languages.

The letter from Cebu

Towards the end, a "letter from Cebu" was edited to all frat brothers from all over the world. He was the result of the continental reports that were presented the first week on the theme of the meeting: "Missionary diocesan priests in the wake of Charles de Foucauld". These reports were refined because each country was allowed to introduce itself and its fraternity. An exceptionally rich exchange and experience of universality. That happening in itself is, in particular, the most important thing of such an international encounter. The letter, four pages long, was worked out according to the method of seeing - judging (distinguished) - acting (calls). What struck me in the first part ("see what's going on in our world") is that this synthesis is completely different from what we brought to the European meeting in Rudy in Poland in July 2017. A lot has happened in our world in the last two years.

Summary of the letter from Cebu

While we were in Cebu, Pope Francis was in Panama for the World Youth Days; in Rwanda, the release of the priest, a member of the fraternity, Denis Sekamana, who was imprisoned for 16 years without any trial, took place after the Rwandan genocide and on an attack on Jolo Cathedral by I.S. 27 people died and 80 injured among the Christians. Extremist Muslims from the South of the Philippines want to disrupt the state because they want their own limited Islamic State.

1 See the reality

a In the world

The contrast rich-poor increases; the poor fight for rights, but are themselves victims of violence and drugs; environmental issues and imminent ecological disaster; refugees for closed borders; nationalism and xenophobia; extremists sow panic; Islam terrorism; development organizations try to cope with all these problems.



b In the church

Indifference and reduction of membership and influence: secularization; ecclesiastical pedophilia; great hope thanks to Evangelii Gaudium: becoming a missionary, preferential option for the poor; lay responsibility; openness to other religions; bet on basic communities.

c In the fraternities

In the traditional Christian countries: membership decreases, aging; desert day and life review are rarely practiced: work on it !; in the South, the fraternities grow limited but steadily; good contacts between North and South (difficult in Africa); importance of monthly meetings; Experience Eucharistic worship better; the poor option is a priority.

2 Judge and distinguish what matters

During the meetings there were, among other things, gospel meditations, reflections on aspects of Foucauld's life, conferences on the theme of the meeting, an explanation of the current affairs of Foucauld; the document about the Nazareth month, the appeal to go to the "periphery" and a call to intensify the care for our "common house". From all these impulses that you must have experienced yourself, it became clear what you can work on.

3 Acts: the calls to the world, the church and the fraternity

a Calls to the world:

Experience a universal fraternity; fight for preservation of the planet, commitment to more justice; dignity of every human person.

b Calls to the church:

Fully experience the missionary dimension; strengthen basic communities: promote cooperation between laymen and priests; go to existential and geographical peripheries; poverty; dialogue with people who think differently; collaborate with other groups; welcome migrants.

c. Calls to our fraternities:

Doing life revision more seriously; worship and desert day planning and experience; promote the Nazareth month; promote international fraternity via <iesuscaritas.org>; the spirituality of Ch. de F. get to know better among the youngsters.

Now we can only hope that all participants succeed in transferring all this to the frat groups of the various countries. This is not easy, because the most peculiar thing about such meetings is the dynamic that arises from living together for a few weeks, talking, meeting and the many opportunities for informal contacts.

The desert day (with experience of poverty) and the reconciliation celebration



a stretch of deserted beach nearby (in the shade); others, including myself to a monastery of ten contemplative sisters. As the van that would bring us on site could not be present in time, we went on foot up the hill, about 40', under the guidance of three people who work at Talavera, to the beautiful, simple

A silent desert day was planned prior to the election of the new international responsible. Aurelio, the outgoing person in charge, gave the following advice: do not bring anything unless you have a picnic. Leave everything open for this day. Whoever wanted could stay on site; others went to



Filipino-style made monastery. That gave us the opportunity to walk through a working-class neighborhood reminiscent of the border of a favela. Hundreds of people live against the hillside in small, sheet-iron houses in a very simple, sometimes clearly poor situation. The contrast with the "chic" house where we stayed was huge. Our house, founded by the Catholic University of Cebu about 20 years ago, could be located anywhere in Flanders. It is a beautiful retreat and meeting house, primarily intended for students and professors of the university and it was always busy. The domain is completely separated with a wall with barbed wire on top and a closed entrance with gates, completely under private surveillance. You don't just come in. Around you see the plates of houses, you hear the noise and the music, it is teeming with young people and children. The people who live there go to work on foot (some of these people also worked in the garden, the cleaning and the kitchen of Talavera) or with a motorcycle. My impression is that they live very simply and poorly, appear dignified and are nicely dressed (the laundry hangs everywhere). When they saw our group pass by, they came to say hello and kindly smile to ask the blessing for their children. A young man who worked in Talavera was going to say goodbye to his mother. A young man who worked in Talavera was going to say goodbye to his mother. Three times our supervisors came to ask if it was going to rise in the great heat. There is a genuine concern for "old" people like me! For me, this confrontation with the living and living situation of these folk people, poorly housed, was the best introduction to the desert day. We were immersed in the full reality of our world in which exaggerated (sometimes even decadent) luxury and (harrowing) poverty are part of our people community. I experienced this day in solitude and silence; was able to share a piece of fruit from my picnic with a few workers who were digging a well in the full sun, just went to pray the rosary with the sisters in the moody open chapel and could sink some of the past ten days. Back in our house there was a reconciliation celebration where we could receive the sacrament together and afterwards be able to experience something of the exuberant "joy of the gospel."



Election of a new general responsible



The day after the desert the election of a successor must be done every six exploratory election the day desert day, it turned out had clearly more votes than won a few votes. Aurelio those people to see if they experience the and with the permission of (who should therefore with the necessary time). Ultimately, only Eric Lozado, a Filipino brother, co-organizer of the meeting, turned out to be the only



day there was for Aurelio. This years. In an before the that two priests four others who then polled all could possibly responsibility their bishop provide them

candidate who could accept. But he had to be elected and that happened with all but three votes. It was very beautiful what followed. Eric started to kneel and asked that we all want to confirm him by stretching out his hands in silence and praying to the Holy Spirit. That took a long time. Then he got up, sat down quietly, and then began to tell something about his (eventful) life. Aurelio gave him a stick with all the data from the past six years. He was also



handed a book about the first fifty years of the priesthood with all the international meetings at that time. It was also quite striking how the Pakistani brothers hung a welcome wreath around Aurelio and Eric and a colorful cloth over both of them. It was not until the following day that Eric would announce who he chose to represent each of the four continents with him.

They became Honoré Savadogo (Burkina Faso - Africa); Matthias Keil (Austria - Europe); Fernando Tapia, (Chile - America) and Tony Llanes (Philippines - Asia). Tony was not on site, but had visited the Philippine brothers a few days before for the Eucharist and the fraternization. That evening the new international team preceded the Eucharist. Eric had chosen the footwash as the gospel. He therefore started washing the feet of the three fellow members present on the team. They then went on to wash the feet of each of the participants. It was an impressive sign of the willingness, as a team, to serve the international fraternity for the next six years in the footsteps of Jesus and Charles de Foucauld. It was a festive celebration.



Festive farewell evening and ... return trip

The last evening there was again a delicious buffet. Then a festive evening, improvised up to and including, with song, dance, music by the participants, but also by a number of sisters and people who had served us in those two and a half weeks.

The next day each went his way. A number went through Dubai. Coming home it was very satisfying after 38 hours of being up, lying in my bed again and being able to sleep for a few hours. The next day I woke up and saw that there was a layer of snow ... The tropical Philippines was exchanged for the wintry Rumbeke.



I was once again able to experience in Cebu that fraternity gives you a new breath.

Guido Debonnet