



Providence at Work in the SMM Cebu Mission under Mary's Inspiration

CEBU, Philippines - The Covid-19 pandemic has caused a lot of changes and adjustments in the Philippine Delegation. One, the International Novitiate could not embark for a new batch of international novices due to the candidates' inability to travel to the Philippines. After finishing the 2019-2020 Batch of International Novices on August 1st, our Delegation Superior, Fr. Norwyn Baydo, SMM, gave me a temporary assignment. In the middle of September, he asked me (together with Bro. Ronald Baruela and later on, Bro. Arnel Collantes, both scholastics) to travel to Cebu and attend to the spiritual needs of the people who are living nearby our Montfort Mission Community in Lower Calajo-an, Minglanilla, Cebu.

Since our arrival, we have been able to continue our mission like celebrating the Sacraments such as of Penance, of Anointing of the Sick and of Holy Eucharist, taking care of the poor by distributing food to the indigent children. All these celebrations were challenging because of the serious threat of the deadly virus. Thus, we always had to observe rigid health protocols. In the celebration of the Holy Mass for instance, the new normal was to get the names and contact information of every person who come for the Eucharistic celebration, checking each one's body temperature as they enter the compound, always wearing face masks and face shields during the celebrations, use of alcohol, proper social distancing, etc.

Initially, we only had a few people who come for the Holy Mass which was held inside our small community chapel. But as the people who come for the Sunday Eucharist grew rapidly into hundreds, we had to use our spacious covered basketball court. The community used their creativity to make the place a decent one by using recycled curtains and boards as an "altar tableau", securing more monobloc or plastic chairs, and decorating the area with some ornamental plants. Even with our best creativity however, the place was still less dignified for the celebration of the Holy Mass. Thus, we initiated a project last December to make a better altar tableau. By the grace of God and with the support of many of our generous friends, our dream came true. By Christmas time, we successfully made a simple, native (made of bamboo), yet

very solemn altar tableau in our "covered-court-turned-place-of-worship". It was our gift to the newly born Jesus inspired by our Blessed Mother!

While we were having the Misa de Gallo (9 days of dawn Masses in preparation for Christmas), we got a very special sign from heaven. On the fourth Sunday of Advent, after the Mass, a couple approached me to inquire if I was willing to receive a statue of our Lady which was initially donated to a particular parish but apparently, it was not accepted for unknown reasons. And I immediately said: "Absolutely! Yes, I will accept!" We were in great awe to see a very beautiful statue of Our Lady of Fatima, a perfect replica of the statue at the Capelinha in Fatima, Portugal. What a powerful sign from Jesus! "Son, here is your Mother." (Jn. 19:27)

As the weeks and even months passed, in March 2021, we got the inspiration to further improve the place of worship and make it even more a worthy place for the solemn celebration of the Holy Mass. We initiated a new and bigger project (an ambitious one!), i.e., tiling (putting of ceramic tiles) the concrete floor.

This expensive project totally depended on Divine Providence again, the first big project we started without any budget at hand. An architect and two civil engineers offered their professional service for free. Many churchgoers and members of the Association of Mary Queen of All Hearts joined together to do some solicitations from prospective donors and benefactors. Personal friends and friends of the congregation also shared what they could afford. Lastly, every Mass attendee likewise gave any amount their limited resources allowed them to generously give. It was touching to hear a mother who approached me after the Mass saying that all his family could share was an amount to buy for one tile, which is about two dollars. She's like the widow in the Gospel who gave all she had for a living (Mk. 12:41-44).

True, people in the neighborhood are generally poor but they are generous. Interesting to note: the scores of the youth who volunteered, the sacristans who worked for free as construction helpers and the mothers who prepared food for lunch to the workers. In one of our Masses, we highlighted our belief in the power of sharing, no matter how small. We expressed it as the "multiplication of the tiles and cement," just as we have the "multiplication of the bread and the fish" in the Bible (Mt 14:13-21). We believe in miracles. And miracles do happen when people share their blessings and Jesus blesses their generous act of giving.

After four months of continuous work and sharing of resources, trust in Divine Providence and inspiration from the Blessed Mother, we are now at the culmination of this project of the tile installation on the floor of the covered-court-turned-place-of-worship. We got more than what we dreamt because not only the floor was improved but also the surroundings. Without doubt, this project is a testament of the power of God, manifested in sharing whatever limited resources each one has, in this time of great financial difficulty due to the pandemic. We gave to Jesus what the people generously shared and like the miracle of the multiplication of loaves, the Lord also blessed the people's gifts and a miracle happened.

As of now, we do not know what's next in the plan of God and what Mama Mary will inspire us (her children) to do. We can see that His Providence continuous to work by touching more people to support the dream of further improving the place. Who knows, this place will become one day, a "Little Shrine of Mary, Queen of All Hearts". Let's see what will unfold before our eyes in the coming weeks and months... It is exciting! All because we have a God, a Father in heaven who will always provide, a Mother who continues to inspire us to do what Her Son tells us and an elder brother Louis-Marie, our model of doing mission. All for the greater glory of GOD ALONE.

Fr. Paul Arnel Lucero, SMM