

JFL visit to Manila

7 – 12 November 2018

My introduction to Manila was not untypical of the rather chaotic place that it is, albeit a rather extreme version! After two uneventful flights, the two members who lead the community there – Bosco and Chris - met me at Manila airport. Bosco is a CJ and Chris an IBVM and for the past five+ years, they have led our small IBVM/CJ joint house of studies in Manila, of which more anon.

Manila has a very civilised habit of allowing “seniors” (so that included all three of us!) to go to the front of the taxi queue, which given that it stretched practically as far as the eye could see at 8.30pm, was a blessing. On the other hand, we landed a taxi driver who, it transpired, had only recently come to Manila and did not know the city – or much English come to that. The good news was that he had ‘sat nav’, the bad news was that it turned out that it was not working, so we joined the traffic crawling out of the airport with Chris trying to give instructions as to how to reach the house on completely the other side of the city. Manila reminded me of Delhi – full of traffic, diesel fumes, people and noise. There was plenty of time to take it all in as we drove through the city on an eight-lane highway – with constant cries from Chris to “keep straight on” or “get into the other lane”, accompanied by the relevant hand and arm waving! All fine until the car stalled in a queue and it became clear after what felt like a very long time, that the gearbox was gone. We were in the third lane with traffic going past on either side and we spent quite a long time trying to work out how to get out, extract the suitcase and get to the edge of the road without issuing an invitation to the angel of death. Eventually, the car was got into first gear and we limped across the traffic and got out to seek another taxi. This was successful and off we went again, though not without all three of us noticing very quickly that, if a match had been lit in front of the mouth of the driver, the car would probably have exploded. New fumes – alcohol this time! Nothing for it but to hope and pray – until this car also stalled! By this time hysteria was setting in. Eventually, over two and a half hours later, we arrived at our destination, already knowing that we had just participated in a “we can dine out on this for the rest of our lives” scenario! Needless to say, both Bosco and Chris were at pains to say that in all the times they had met people from the airport during the past five years, nothing like that had ever happened before! Note to selves – put her on the airport bus on the way back! And they did and I was there very peacefully in 45 minutes!



Before leaving the subject of traffic and transport, I will just describe the two most common types of public transport in Manila – the jeepny and the tricycle. The former is a kind of elongated jeep, which stops on demand – by knocking on the tin roof. Payment is made by passing the fare down the bus from person to person, with the driver accepting payment with his right hand, which he also uses for counting out and returning any change. Steering is done with the left hand, which also multitasks by holding, folded between the fingers, any notes used for payment. All the jeepnies looked

very old indeed – reminiscent of cars in Cuba – but they are effective and very cheap, except, I imagine, in terms of the cost of the respiratory diseases they and the rest of the traffic must cause.

The tricycle is a motor bike with a tiny sidecar literally bolted on to it – the latter with only one wheel, hence tricycle. Three people can fit inside with great discomfort and two with only mild discomfort. In addition, a further two people can – and do - ride pillion behind the driver. The tricycles too are effective, albeit, of course, a little more expensive than the jeepnies.



Our joint house, which currently has two IBVM and six CJ members, is in the part of Manila called Cubao, once the commercial centre but no longer. Within walking distance of our house is the area where our sisters run a small after school centre for 15 children. To say that this is a poor neighbourhood is a considerable understatement. I visited both the after school centre and the neighbourhood on my first afternoon there. The poverty certainly rivals anything I have seen in India. It is good to know that we are one of the “drops in the ocean” of those trying to do something to support the people, whose cheerfulness and resilience in the face of so much poverty and so little opportunity is extraordinary and edifying. It also never ceases to amaze and impress me how those who are very poor almost always have the cleanest of clothes, despite the enormous difficulties involved in washing and drying them in terms of pollution levels, lack of water, lack of space and so on.



On my second day, we visited a very well-known community programme in a completely different part of the city being run by a small NGO founded by the FCJ sisters, one of whom, an Englishwoman, runs the project, together with a small team of two of her own members, both from Indonesia and several lay people, all of them local. It serves what amounts to a vast shantytown that has grown up beside what was an enormous rubbish dump, on which many of those living in the shantytown used to scavenge in order to try and earn some kind of living. However, because of the instability of the “hill” of rubbish, the dump has now been closed and, indeed, has begun to green over. However, the people remain in the area and eke out what living they can, some by making mattresses from old foam rubber, which they then try, and sell in other parts of the city, others by sorting rubbish scavenged in other areas and so on. The houses are generally one room and some people cook in that room and sell the food on the street, as many have to buy street food, as they cannot afford a cooker or the gas to cook on it. Some roads in the town are concrete and some just mud – becoming lethal when the rainy season comes. Flooding, including of the very rudimentary sewage system, is frequent. The programmes being run by the community centre support over 1600 families. They include a weekly health clinic and home visits by the nurse, craft and baking classes for the women so that they can sell what they produce; a tiny co-op, which also runs a micro-financing co-operative bank; computer and other classes. The list is endless and I was hugely impressed by what is being done there. The photos show the scale of the challenge.



That afternoon I visited the enormous ATENEO site where the Jesuits run a university, a secondary school, an elementary school, a theology school and the East Asia Pastoral Institute. The latter is known throughout Asia for the quality of its programmes, including the five-month pastoral leadership programme in which five of our members from India and Nepal have participated for each of the last three years.



I also had the opportunity to visit the IBVM novitiate, which is a short distance from the joint community. Here there are currently six novices: three from Vietnam, one from India and two from Bangla Desh, together with an Australian novice director and an Indian member who works with her.

The next two days were spent having 121 conversations with our 8 sisters in Manila – 7 from Korea and 1 from China. In the house of studies are 6 members, five of them studying either English or theology. The two engaged in the after school study centre live with another congregation



at present, but that is dependent on the numbers studying. For all of those studying, it is immensely demanding to have to do so in English. The sister who has come over from Korea to take over the after school centre has elected not to learn English but the local language Tagalog, instead. As always, it was a privilege to have these conversations and learn more about the journey of each one in her life and her religious life.

As you will have deduced, Manila makes a very strong impact on the visitor – hot, humid, dirty, noisy, chaotic, incredibly busy and populous and, for a European, and a north European at that, “in your face”. There was much to remind one of India. However, my lasting impression, even though I did not actually meet or speak to many Filipino people, was, as I mentioned earlier, a sense of resilience and cheerfulness, much of it, I am sure, rooted in the deep faith of the vast majority of people. Going to daily Mass each morning at 6.10 (the first Mass of the day is at 5.30) one found the local cathedral full of people. There was a small choir and a liturgy leader at each Mass and that is the same for all Masses in all churches apparently. I had the sense of people proud of their faith and very committed to it. What a gift to have witnessed that and to know that in some small way the CJ is helping some of those whose lives are impoverished in so many ways. I am sure that our small presence and efforts are gladdening Mary Ward’s heart, once again in a part of the world of which she had probably not even heard. *Ad majorem Dei gloriam...*

JFL CJ
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