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Annual Newsletter of the Society of Mary– Marist Communities in the District of Asia

CONTENTS

- Message from the District Superior
- Fr. Chris
- St. Peter Chanel
- Fr. Lauro
- Futuna Mission
- Fr. Pat
- Marist Mission Ranong
- Fr. Larry
- Balay Pasilungan
- Fr. Gil
- Our Lady of Fatima
- Fr. Chris
- Prison Ministry
- Fr. Pat
- Study in Rome
- Fr. Lionel
- Interreligious and Intercultural Programme IRICD
- Fr. Ricardo
- Education and Health Program
- Fr. Arnold
- New Lay District Staffs



However, there seems some sort of new forms of virus which inflict and hurt people nowadays. It is the virus of war, broken families, violence, migration due to violence and conflict, displacement of people, drugs, extra judicial killings, mental health issues, climate change and environmental destruction. These issues are overwhelming at times and quite hard to fathom and find solutions. Nevertheless, we must never lose hope and confidence that God is still in control of what is happening around us and in the world.

In spite these concerns, the Church is courageously invited to proclaim the Joy of the Gospel to counter the effects of secularization, progress and social media. People have returned to Church to keep the faith and sense of God. Sacraments are made available through the spirituality of stewardship. In a Synodal way, Church leaders are more aware of their duties to be with people in their journey of faith.

Throughout the year, God has bestowed on the District graces which we are thankful of. The men in the District are

Greetings from Asia!

We are fortunate that we have overcome the catastrophe brought about by Covid pandemic. Nowadays, people are more free to move around. Economy and business are gradually flourishing again. Travels are more convenient as restrictions and protocols have been lifted. People can make visits and see their loved ones and friends. Nevertheless, we remain vigilant and extra careful.

in good form, committed and generous to the mission. In formation, we have two incoming novices who will join the Novitiate program in 2024. We have 10 young men in accompaniment program with one coming from Vietnam. After a break of 3 years, the International Novitiate of the Society has returned to Davao this year. Two of our men have completed their post theological studies while one is doing preparatory course for formation. As one ministry closed, a new one opened at St. Michael Christian community and chaplaincy work. The Omnes Gentes mission in Ranong was the venue for Marist mission studies for young Marists ready become missionaries to the world. And at the same time a new ministry on interreligious and intercultural dialogue commenced. The parish mission in Matti, Digos City has started the building of the new Church which brings excitement to the people. Financial and material resources to sustain our communities and apostolates came in through the help of many people.

The Marists are called to be conscious of what is going on around the world, the Church and the mission and be able to reflect, listen to the voice of God and do what is required. Inspired by the life of Mary and many Marists who have gone ahead of us, in spite of our limited personnel and resources, with joy and availability, we strive to live our life in Mary's way and fulfill the mission entrusted to us by the Lord and the Church. What does God have to say in what is happening to us, in the Church and in the world? Where can we find the strength and power to live our faith and do our part to make this world a better, happy and peaceful place to live in? Where does the Church get the inspiration not to lose her relevance to bringing Christ and spreading the values of the Gospel? To whom would the Marists get the convictions to be catalysts of mercy and love to the world?

There is only response to all these questions and concerns. It is from the incarnated Son of God-Jesus Christ who became one of us, embracing the pains and joys of humanity and the world and through his passion, death and resurrection has given hope and new life to the fallen humanity and brought reconciliation with God once again. This is the wisdom and mystery of celebrating Christmas every year: God has never tired of loving us. God has not given up on us. God's mercy persists in times of crisis. God's light wins over darkness. God's goodness shall prevail.

So with firm trust and hope, let the celebration of Christmas be a time to feel God's continual presence among us in the midst of a broken and messy world. Let Jesus usher us new life, joy, reconciliation, peace and love. Let him bring harmony to a divided world and compel us to be bearers of harmony. Let the joy of Christ make us instruments of joy. Let the humility of Christ make us humble and rely to God more than ourselves. Let Jesus give us hope and make us bearers of hope.

To all those who supported and allowed us to feel the presence of God all year through, to our mission partners, benefactors, benevolent friends and loved ones, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude and appreciation for all you have done to us and to our mission in Asia. With your generous help, we are able to sustain our lives, communities and in particular our different ministries and apostolates in Davao and Thailand. May your Christmas celebration be filled with God's abundant blessing as you continue to share your blessing to us and to others. Please rest assured of our prayers to each of you and your loved ones.

I greet each of you a blessed and peaceful Christmas with abundant and hope-filled New Year 2024.

God's blessing be with you all!

Christopher Thadeos Ganzon S. M.

District Superior



ST. PETER CHANEL COMMUNITY

Climb to Mt. Belemingoy

Higher places give a better view of things around us. It helps one appreciate what we have and forget for a while what we lack while we are down there at the bottom of life.

In June this year, right after the school year ends, St. Peter Chanel community with the two postulants and friends of the community spent sometime outdoor and climbed the popular Mount Belemingoy in the southern part of Mindanao. The two Marist priests, two postulants, a fitness instructor, school registrar, a Marist staff, a Marist laity, 3 friends of the community and a tour guide braved the 6 hours climbed to spend a night in the scenic lake on the crater of the volcano. They spend a time of prayer, reflection and assessment of the past school years' experience. The descent from the mountain brought feelings of peace and renewed enthusiasm for this year.

Looking at the Future with Hope

The District Chapter 2023 had a theme that states: "Looking forward to the future with hope." The beginning of the school year 2023-2024 has enthused and filled us with hope to look towards the future. The number of the students in MICS program has increased. Mostly, these new students come from Cotabato Province who knew the Marists through a connection made by the aunt of one of the postulants. They are currently attending lectures in the University of Immaculate Conception earning a degree in Philosophy specialising on methodological research.

Bringing in South East Asian Vocations to Mary's Society

This year's formation of Marist aspirants is taking a new shape with the arrival of Nguyen Dinh Vu a.k.a. "Joseph." Through social media Joseph was able to find the Marist contact. He visited the district last year to see experience the Marist communities in Mindanao. After several months of accompaniment he decided to return and apply to join the Marist formation program. He is graduate of Bachelor of Science in Psychology and is currently earning some units in Philosophy. Joseph is not the only South East Asian who is joining the Society, there are also two Burmese young men who are currently discerning their vocation with our Marist community in Ranong.



DIGOS COMMUNITY

FUTUNA MISSION COMMUNITY

The Marists arrived in Matti, Digos City in 2011. We were given an area by Bishop Guillermo Afable, DD to look after the pastoral needs of 7 barangays and 10 schools. We are also ministering at the two jails of the city. In September 2019, our Catholic center was erected as a Parish named after Our Lady of Fatima. We are serving 24 Basic Christian communities. As Marists, we were delighted to be given this opportunity to serve the faithful of the Diocese of Digos in Mary's certain way.

After the District Chapter in January 2023, we named our community as Futuna Mission community. This name reminds us of who we are and what our ministry is all about. That we are missionaries called to proclaim the Gospel, share our Marist Charism, support the local Church and build the Kingdom of God in this mission place. We are inspired by the life and work of St. Peter Chanel who died as a Martyr in the island of Futana.

Currently, there are three of us living in the community and ministering at the Parish. Pat Muckian is the superior of the Marist community. Chris Gazon is the parish priest. Lionel Mechavez is the new member of the community whose main ministry is vocation as well as helping out in the Parish. We are grateful to all of you who have prayed and supported us and our ministry in Digos over the years.



“Let us never forget that the heart of our mission is to bring souls to Christ.”

-St. Peter Chanel



MARIST MISSION RANONG



MMS Participants with the Fr. John Larsen, FMS Brothers,
Frs. Larry and Richie (Facilitators) and Mr. Tony See (One of the resource speakers)



The 10 participants



MMS with the Buddhist Community in Bangkok

The Marist Mission Studies (MMS) was hosted by the Marist Ranong Community between September 5th and September 29th, 2023. There were 10 participants from different Marist communities from Fiji, Tonga, Vanuatu, Peru, Senegal, Cameroon, 2 from Brazil, and 2 from PNG. The main goal of the MMS was to inflame the participants' passion for the Marist mission. The entire program was divided into three parts. The first part of the MMS started in Bangkok, and the second part was in Ranong. The final part involved a 2-day mission retreat held at the OMI retreat house in Samphan, Bangkok.

We are grateful to the many individuals who contributed to the success of MMS 2023. A special thanks to Fr. John Larsen, our Superior General, who initiated the program and entrusted the organizing and running of the MMS to the Ranong community. Thank you also to the major superiors and communities of the 10 participants who made some sacrifices to allow our confreres to participate in the MMS.

We hope that their passion for the Marist mission will continue to enflame and bear fruit in their respective mission stations. Our Marist way of working together can make a significant contribution to the mission of the Trinity.

BALAY PASILUNGAN



Love is Never Wasted: Celebrating 34 Years of Balay Pasilungan

Balay Pasilungan, a shelter for children in need of special protection, has recently marked its 34th Foundation Anniversary with a series of events that reflect its commitment to protecting and nurturing children. This milestone commemorates the role of St. Joseph as a provider for the Holy Family and emphasizes the importance of love in creating a nurturing environment for children.

One of the highlights of the anniversary was the "Love is Never Wasted: A Dinner for a Cause". The event was a great success. It featured performances by The Kaliwat, Fr. Bonn Barretto, and other local artists and was attended by approximately 600 people, which showed the community's strong support for Balay Pasilungan's mission.

In addition to these events, Fr. Gil Casio's role extends beyond the walls of Balay Pasilungan. As a member of the Regional Development Council at the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA), he has significantly contributed to the Davao Region Development Plan 2023-2028, focusing on the welfare of children, youth, and women.

Laudato Si Week was another focal point, with Balay Pasilungan's staff and volunteers recommitting to the Laudato Si Pledge to address climate change and pro-

mote environmental stewardship. This initiative highlights the center's holistic approach to education and advocacy. Balay Pasilungan has taken a crucial step towards improving mental health support by establishing a specialized psychological unit. This initiative aims to offer comprehensive psychological services to children, staff, and volunteers. This marks a significant advancement in the center's services.

The establishment of the first digital science library, STARBOOKS (Science and Technology Academic and Research-Based Openly-Operated Kiosk) by the Department of Science and Technology (DOST), enhances learning opportunities for the children, providing access to a wide range of educational materials and tools. A significant development for the staff was the recent workshop focused on adapting the International ISO standard aimed at enhancing the center's operational efficiency and service quality, which demonstrates Balay Pasilungan's dedication to continuous improvement and professional development.

As Balay Pasilungan celebrates its 34th year, these initiatives and achievements reflect its unwavering dedication to nurturing, empowering, and advocating for the children and youth, making it a pillar of hope and compassion in the community.





The House of Mary: OLFP Church Construction Continues

It has been four years since the establishment of the Our Lady of Fatima Parish, Matti, Digos City, Philippines as one of the youngest parishes in the Diocese of Digos by Most Rev. Guillermo Afable, DD on September 8, 2019. After four years, together with Engr. Christopher Lopez and Arch. RJ Razonable, the construction for the church's structure has finally commenced last June 4, 2023. The estimated overall cost is 45 Million pesos, and over the course of almost a decade of preparation, the community had raised P10M to fund the initial construction of the project. The structure is expected to be standing on the land after three to five years timeframe of its completion. The parish with the full cooperation of all its faithful, continues to raise funds for the actualization of its dream church through various fundraising initiatives such as the Light a Star Card in December, calling for donations in both monetary and construction materials, and solicitations. Such great hope and intense faith and devotion to our heavenly Mother call for generosity, patience and unity among all parishioners. May this communal effort of them would be realized sooner with the intercession of our Blessed mother Mary. We are grateful for all those who have supported our on-going Church project.

A faithful encounter: Youth Prayer Meeting

The Youth Prayer Meeting officially commenced last March 17, 2023 wherein the first three sessions were held in the parish's catechetical center. In the following sessions, the group decided to visit the youths on their respective GKKs from the five zones of the parish. It is for this reason that the Marist Fathers took the initiative to request some financial help from the Marist Mission Centre-Australia.



The prayer meeting became a very fruitful and meaningful youth visitation. Through the prayer meeting, there were good number of youths who signed up in different Church's ministries and apostolates coming from the different GKKs the group had visited. There have been 535 young people who have participated so far. It is a story of a faithful encounter. A faithful encounter between God and His loving servants who longed for Him, looked for Him, and needed for Him in their lives.

The Youth Prayer Meeting continues to extend God's immense love to the youth across the entire parish community. It continues to bring the presence of Christ to the weeping youth in the parish, stimulating their hopes and consoling them in their current life state problems. It also continued to fish more servants of God as it reached its primary goal



Being instruments of mercy at the Prison

It has been 13 years since the Marists first began the Prison Ministry in the Digos Diocese. During that time many Marists had been involved and it has become a core part of our Parish ministry. Recently Bishop Guillermo Afable, DD celebrated Prison Awareness Sunday in our recently blessed new Chapel inside the Provincial Rehabilitation Center. This was made possible by the generosity of the Marist Mission Centre and a local donor. For the inmates it's a sacred space where they come and pray and relax too. Each Sunday we say Mass in one of the prisons.

Our GKK's take turns to serve in the prison. Last week Pat Muckian attended with Fr. Jay (Assumption of St. Augustine) and two VIPS (Volunteers in Prison Ministry). They had inputs from Bishop Joel Baylon on synodal way and also inputs from lawyers, activists, psychologists on Prison welfare.

The focus is always on the PDL (Person Deprived of Liberty) and help them to rehabilitate with the many programmes on offer. They deal with their own vulnerability. They experience despair, fears, sadness, brokenness and indeed healing. Fr. Rudy Lumbo S.J. shared many stories of his 11 years as a Prison Chaplain. Many times he cried as he experienced the beauty of conversion and love in others and how grace renewed and revived hope and faith in the Risen Lord. Of course as chaplains and volunteers, we are aware of our own sinfulness and the need of ongoing conversion in life. Yes, he is called to see Christ in each prisoner. "When I was in prison you came to visit me".





Embarking on my journey to study for a licentiate in Sacred Theology in Spirituality in Rome was a profound experience, both academically and spiritually. This experience was a divine gift, allowing me to momentarily step back from active ministry to immerse myself in a deeper understanding of faith. Rome, being the center of Catholicism, offered an unparalleled opportunity to connect with the roots of my Christian faith.

The city's rich history and vibrant culture created a unique backdrop for my studies. Walking the same streets as countless spiritual leaders before me was profoundly inspiring. The knowledge and perspectives I gained from renowned theologians and peers from around the world were invaluable.

This journey was more than academic; it was a soul's pilgrimage for healing and growth. Amidst ancient churches and sacred sites, I found moments of profound reflection and spiritual growth. The experience was transformative, reshaping my approach to ministry with a renewed sense of purpose and a deeper connection to my faith.

Study in Rome

I am deeply grateful for this life-changing experience. It has not only enriched my understanding of theology but also reinforced my Marist commitment to serving with a heart more attuned to the spiritual needs of others.

I am immensely grateful for the support of my confreres in the District of Asia and Rome, which was instrumental in making this life-changing possible. Their belief in my potential and commitment to my growth has left an indelible mark on my spiritual journey and service.



Interreligious and Intercultural Programme IRICD



Participants of the Interreligious Leaders Encounter for Dialogue and



IRICD Workshop with MAF Students



The MAF Intercultural Day was attended by the MAF community, two Thai schools, and

In early 2022, a new programme under the Marist Asia Foundation (MAF) was created. It is called the Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue Programme (IRICD). This programme has been helping to create communities where peace and harmony are their uniting force regardless of the differences in faith or cultural tradition of the people. We believe that people of diverse cultures and religions can live together in a spirit of dialogue, mutual respect and understanding, in peace and justice.

Ranong is a place that complies with the reality of diversity since it is a place of encounter between Thai citizens and Burmese people. Likewise, although Buddhism has been the dominant way of life on this side of the world, Buddhists must relate to Christians and Muslims.

The IRICD team itself is diverse too, as a good witness to the advocacy that we are promoting. We are four teammates: a Filipino Marist priest, Fr. Hermes; a Burmese Buddhist woman, Ms. Htet Pyie Pyie Khine; a Mexican Marist, Fr. Richi and Port, our Thai citizen. Four people with different languages and different nationalities are motivated to work together and be a sign of harmonious conviviality.

The work of the IRICD has been a mind and hearth opening experience for many people, including for the IRICD team members. The workshops, seminars, youth camps, interreligious gatherings, and other activities that we organise have been an initial and positive experience to increase the desire in people to reach out to others; a learning experience to become more aware of our need for dialogue; and an inspiration to become brothers and sisters.

We know about the reality of war right now in many parts of the world. We believe as an IRICD team that our humble advocacy can contribute to building peace and harmony and thus prevent falling into the atrocities of war. Dialogue can be a path of uniting people and avoiding division.

Education Program



Marist Asia Foundation education program has provided non-formal education to the Myanmar migrant children for the last 17 years. It has produced competent graduates who are working in migrant oriented non-government organisations and business establishments in Ranong and in nearby provinces.

This year there are 286 students who are enrolled in the Preparation Program and Secondary Program. The number has increased because of the closure of some migrant learning centres and the influx of migrants who are seeking refuge from the ongoing violence in Myanmar.

The education program implements both Myanmar education curriculum with emphasis on acquiring skills in Thai, Burmese and English languages.

The Thai Non-Formal Education offered at MAF is looked upon as a replicable model for providing education to the migrants. Research conducted by Teacher Focus mentioned the initiative of MAF of having a Memorandum of Understanding with the Office of Thai Non-Formal Education.

Aside from the secondary program, MAF also provides computer, Thai and English skills to the migrant workers during the weekends.

MAF's experience illustrates that obtaining an Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with (KOSONO) KSN might be a practical solution for MLCs to register under the Office of Non-Formal and Informal Education (ONIE).

For MAF, being an NFE learning center provides several benefits. Firstly, the agreement with KSN offers protection. This is particularly important in Ranong where authorities are much stricter about unregistered schools. Secondly, the smaller requirements for teaching KSN gives their school the flexibility to supplement the core curriculum with subjects such as Burmese and English. Thirdly, the school can continue to employ volunteer workers (for example: migrant 'teachers'), even though they are not allowed to use that title.

Health Program



The Marist Asia Foundation is taking care 117 persons living with HIV-AIDS (PLHIV). The program involves providing translation services for the patients at the Thai government hospital, providing support for blood tests like HIV and CD4 testing, providing financial support and medical assistance for extremely poor patients to access health cards and medicines for opportunistic infections, providing pastoral counseling for the patient and the family, providing nutrition and basic needs assistance to poorest patients in need, providing rent assistance to poor families especially the orphaned children live in a safe and adequate place, providing community health education and facilitating self-help group sessions.

The program has helped the PLHIV-AIDS to live a normal life. Currently, the health program in coordination with another organisation, is training three patients to become future hospital translators.



OUR NEW LAY DISTRICT STAFFS



On July 12, 2023, the St.Peter Chanel community acquired their new finance officer. She is Janelle June S. Villar, an accounting technology graduate from the Cor Jesu College, Inc. in Digos City. She will do tasks relative to the financial matters of the community together with the community bursar, Fr. Gil Casio, SM.

On August 01, 2023, Melbert N. Brillos started his ministry as the Lay Vocation Promoter and assistant admin of the Society of Mary. He was appointed as a replacement to Fr. Roque Rebito, SM as he will be leaving the community for his formation study. Melbert was a former seminarian of the Society of Mary. He finished his bachelor's degree in Philosophy specializing in Research in the University of the Immaculate Conception. He will be working with Fr. Lauro in doing admin responsibilities.





Vicente Manansala's *Madonna of the Slums* is a **portrayal of a mother and child from the countryside who became urban shanty residents once in the city.** The Marists in Asia works with people who were once countryside folks who braved the oppressive urban conditions to keep the economic situation of their family afloat.

