

Christmas in Asia



SOCIETY OF MARY
DISTRICT OF ASIA

#82, First Avenue, Juna Subdivision,
Matina, Davao City, Philippines

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KEEPING TRADITIONS ALIVE and MEANINGFUL

This Christmas is certainly different from the many years of our celebrations. COVID 19 has undeniably changed the world from the moment of its outbreak. The world was not prepared to face this pandemic. But slowly people have faced it positively despite the challenges it brought to them. It is also undeniably true that this pandemic has taught us lessons; lessons that are already present but we have neglected before. COVID 19 would be part of our lives in the years to come, but it showed us and brought us closer to essential things that truly matter: faith in God, family, friends, support, love, generosity. These essentials thrive along the way.

Disney Company has launched its Christmas Ad this year titled *"From Our Family To Yours."* It showcases a heartwarming Filipino story of a grandmother, her granddaughter and the family traditions that connect them through the years. The Ad shows *"parol"* a Filipino ornamental lantern made from bamboo, *"mano po"* kissing the hands of elders, *"pasalubong"* bringing of gifts to family members. These scenarios bring nostalgia to us who grew up experiencing these Christmas traditions. We might have different family traditions but Christmas is always memorable and even more meaningful when it is celebrated with the people close to our hearts.

Many of us could not go home to our families to celebrate and experience these traditions over again. But let these traditions relive and find new meaning as we discover and share Jesus to people we encounter, far from our biological families yet near to one another, in our own communities and with the people in our ministries.

Through the years, circumstances differ; the meaning of Christmas remains the same. God shows His infinite love to the humanity through the birth of His only begotten Son into our own context: struggling, wounded, fractured and scattered. In this human conditions, far from being perfect that the Light of Salvation breaks in to bring hope to all of us.



From the District Superior's Desk

We could have asked these questions: What's the point of celebrating Christmas while in the pandemic? Is there a need to celebrate it?

We could agree with these questions as we celebrate Christmas this year: God has become one of us in Jesus. This mystery of Incarnation is beyond our human mind to fully comprehend. And yet, in and through Jesus, God is fully revealed to us and is given a human face that anyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life. (Jn 3:16) Seeing the face of Jesus is seeing the face of God, in its fullness. Being with Jesus is being with God, who is life, consolation, mercy, hope and peace.

Living in life, mercy, hope, consolation, and peace brought to us by the Holy Child is the reason why there is an ever need to celebrate Christmas this year. This pandemic has turned the world upside down and has caused so much suffering, disconnection, death, fear, anxiety, and darkness. How can we face all these? We welcome Jesus again and let Him be born in our lives wherever we find ourselves at this time. In our homes, communities, schools, workplaces, streets, hospitals, orphanages, in the borders, in business firms, in the government, in the marketplaces, in jails and detention facilities. Or in any place where hope is much needed to affect people's lives.



Let us share that light and comfort to others and in our world beset by loss, discomfort and uncertainties.

All these spaces must be filled with the Spirit of Life which is brought to us by the birth of a Saviour, who is to come again. Let us share that light and comfort to others and in our world beset by loss, discomfort and uncertainties.

Marists around the world have been affected by this pandemic since its outbreak. Some of our confreres got sick. Sadly, we lost some of them. We grieve for their death and pray for protection and healing of those who are infected by the virus. We, as missionaries of the faith are called to be in the frontline to share the light of Christ.

Our people at this time need our presence and pastoral care. Many of them draw strength and inspiration from us. They seek guidance from us. Each of us is called to become a visible presence of this little Child born on Christmas day, born in our hearts.



In the midst of the pandemic, as Jesus pitched his tent among us, as Marists we commit ourselves to serve you with compassion, joy, love and respect.

Let Jesus be born anew in our hearts and in our world at this time of pandemic. May He fill us and our world with new life, hope, mercy, consolation and peace!

Hence, we share to you our stories and encounters over the last six months of the year on this issue of our District newsletter. Enjoy the read!

May we all have a meaningful Christmas celebration and a grace-filled New Year 2021.

Fr. Christopher Thadeos R. Ganzon, SM
District Superior

Christmas is also an opportune time to be grateful to people who in one way or another, have become the presence of this Holy Child in our midst all year round. Every 23rd November of each year, we remember the arrival of the first Marists who came to the Philippines to start the Marist project in Asia. We thank our benefactors, donors, mission partners, family members, relatives, staff, volunteers, and friends who have prayed and supported us. This Christmas we express our profound gratitude to each of you.

We are also very grateful for all our Marist confreres all over the world especially our leadership team in Rome for their constant fraternal and spiritual support.

And lastly, to the “least, last and the lost” who have reminded and shown us God’s loving and merciful face, you too deserve our gratitude and appreciation. Our Burmese students and patients in Ranong (Education, Health and IRD); boys at Balay Pasilungan; staff, students, teachers and administrators of the non-sectarian schools under Catholic Campus Ministry of Davao (CCMD); the personnel and persons deprived of liberty in Digos and Davao jails; and our parishioners and leaders at Our Lady of Fatima Parish, Matti, Digos City.

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MARISTS IN DAVAO

St. Peter Chanel Formation Community



GOD'S ABIDING PRESENCE

Life goes on for us.

In the middle of this year, Fr. Lionel Mechavez and Fr. Gil Casio joined our community after their Colinian renewal from France. This year we became the largest community in the District of Asia. We have 5 priests and a brother living in one community. This was not the case before in the district. Communities in the early days were usually composed of just two perpetually professed Marists and lucky to have had another member who might be a temporary professed on Marist Mission Experience program.

This grace of being the largest community in the district will not last long.

Three months ago, Fr. Lionel prepared to hand over the operation of Balay Pasilungan (*Home for Street Boys*) to Fr. Gil, who will be the next director of Balay Pasilungan beginning in January of 2021. Bro. Denis who was requested to help in the construction of the district chapel, which was postponed because of COVID 19 restrictions in Davao City, might go back to New Zealand after his two years contract with the district of Asia. Fr. John Pereira, who is the most senior Marist living in the community is a lovely addition to keep the community of at least four perpetually professed Marists.



One of the challenges during this year is the impact of the pandemic in the life of the formation community. The MICS-Marist Interested College Students were all confined in the compound of the Formation house. They attended lectures, did exams and studies online. They seemed to get use to that rhythm though they yearn to go out and visit places like they used to do in the past years. We do not have the means to bring them out together or do any activity as a group beyond the fences of the residence. They will be spending Christmas and New Year with the Marist community due to the difficulty of travelling this year. Formators are giving Marist classes and human formation activities to the MICS during this Christmas break.

In September this year, Fr. John Guo Wang got a little panic when he was informed that one of the teachers from one of the schools where he celebrated Mass got COVID. When the school made a contact tracing it was discovered that the teacher was not present during the Mass. Just recently the community got worried that the husband of a CCMD staff got COVID but the staff was negative. This method of contact tracing helped to lessen the fear and panic about COVID.



COVID had impacted our life in so many ways. It challenged us to be creative to deal with difficulties and hardships. It taught us to be patient with one another and humble ourselves in the face of situation we cannot control. It made us closer to one another particularly to love ones whom we cannot see these days.

It raised our consciousness of God's abiding presence through those people who are helping us during this difficult time. Despite of the challenges we face, we recognized that we are blessed. Our hearts are grateful that we are safe. Our life will go on.



Fr. Lauro, Fr. Lionel, Bro. Denis, Fr. John Guo Wang and Fr. Gil

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Despite of the challenges we face, we recognized that we are blessed.”

LEARNING CONTINUES FOR BAPAS BOYS

Our BAPAS boys (*Balay Pasilungan- Home for Street Boys*) has to adapt to the new learning methods brought by the current situation. The pandemic has resulted to a time of uncertainty and challenges not just in the people's livelihood, business, and health but also in the field of education. The Department of Education has officially commenced its full implementation of education system under the "New Normal" last October 5, 2020. It is to respond to the challenges brought by COVID 19 in the field of basic education. This new education system made use of the two modes of learning: The Online Distance Learning and Modular Distance Learning. In these methods, children will be able to continue their studies and learn their lessons without attending the face to face regular classes. In spite of all the hindrances we were experiencing, we were able to cope up, adapt and engage in the new normal education system.

We are fortunate that most of our staff are assisting and teaching the boys. They devote half of their working time to assist the boys in their studies.

(Fr. Lionel Mechavez, SM)



CCMD has decided to offer live-stream Holy Mass services and online spiritual support for the staff and students. However, it is still a challenge to push these new platforms due to the lack of facilities.

We keep praying and remain hopeful that our life will soon go back to the way we used to, so that students will be able to come back to schools and CCMD ministries will bounce back to life again.

(Fr. John Guo Wang, SM)



CCMD EXPLORES NEW WAYS

COVID 19 has strongly impacted Catholic Campus Ministry of Davao since most of its programs require big gatherings of students and teachers; giving of sacraments, recollections and retreats. CCMD ministries have been forced to adapt to a new circumstance beyond our control. Aware of the challenges, CCMD team strived hard to find ways to reach out to the schools for the spiritual nourishment of their students and staff.

MARISTS IN RANONG, THAILAND

Community and Marist Asia Foundation

The Marist Community in Ranong has enjoyed some significant moments over the past few months in supporting the Burmese Migrant Community with Health and Education Programmes.

GRADUATION DAY: ACU CERTIFICATE OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

On December 5 we celebrated another dream come true for the Marist Mission in Ranong. Five young Burmese Migrant Teachers at Marist Asia Foundation graduated with an Australian Catholic University Certificate in Teaching and Learning. We were able to see the long term education commitment bearing fruit with graduates from our Secondary Programme continuing into Higher Education with the ACU Diploma. Some of these graduates, who have become our Teachers and Health Workers, have now been able to complete a further qualification as Teachers. Young students have now become Young Teachers and leaders for their community. It is a great sign of hope as education is recognized as one of the best gifts that can be given to a Migrant community.



NEW ROOF AND ACTIVITY AREA

Ranong has an infamous weather pattern – it has the highest rainfall in Thailand, and of Ranong fame, has souvenir t-shirts depicting 8 months rain, 4 months sun. This creates a challenge for a large number of students. In 2020 we managed to fundraise and build a large roof and shade extension to the Marist Centre. This increased space allows students to get out of their classrooms, and eat and enjoy some sport activities like Badminton and Volleyball and Caneball. It has given the Marist Centre the ability to welcome extra students next year and the activity area has already been put to good use with Health Programme Community Meetings and a concert with the local Security Forces seeking to network with the local Burmese Migrant Community. Fr Hermes Sabud SM performed his new song ‘Behind the Mountain’ at this event to the applause of many staff and locals.

WORLD AIDS DAY

Every year the Marist team working in the HIV Health Programme co-ordinates a special activity to commemorate the World HIV Day (Dec 5). Ranong has a large number of people affected by HIV. There is a continued need to help people understand HIV, reduce discrimination and support people to get tested and consequently receive ARV medication. In 2020 the Marist Centre hosted a larger event networking with the Thai Public Health Office and World Vision. It was an opportunity to engage our 180 students to learn more about health and the importance of compassion and understanding for those living with HIV AIDS. Fr Hermes Sabud SM leads the HIV Health Programme with 5 Burmese staff and it is a constant inspiration to see them go out daily to the streets and homes of the abandoned and suffering bringing compassion and hope.

EDUCATION PATHWAYS FOR BURMESE CHILDREN

The Education of Burmese Migrant Children in Ranong has been critically affected by the closure of 9 Migrant Learning Centres since August 2019. While the Marist Centre and Education Programmes have been able to continue, the closure of all other Learning Centres has created a dilemma of many 'Out of School Children'. The Marist Team have been advocating with the Ministry of Education and local government officials to propose a working model for a Migrant Learning Centre that can satisfy both security concerns and quality education concerns. In August, the Marist Centre was given permission and status as a 'Community Learning Centre'. In September we reached another milestone with 40 students in the Burmese Migrant Secondary Programme completing a recognized Thai Non Formal Thai Ministry of Education Primary Programme and beginning the Non Formal Secondary Programme.

(Fr. Frank Bird, SM)

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We hope and pray for Learning Centres to be re-opened so as to return Burmese Migrant Children to Education in Ranong.



Fr. Hermes, Fr. Kevin and Fr. Frank

MARISTS IN MATTI Community and Our Lady of Fatima Parish



WE CHOOSE TO LIVE

One of the gifts that we have received this year is the people whom we ministered here in Our Lady of Fatima Parish as the main pastoral work of Marists working in Matti, Digos City. We and the parishioners have faced many challenges related to COVID 19. Some of us unfortunately had been exposed to a parishioner who died of another disease but later was found out to be infected by the virus. We closed the parish for over a week. It was a turning experience for all of us. Over those days, we received enormous support from our parishioners. They brought food to us thinking that we might starved ourselves since we told our house staff to do their home quarantine.

Despite of all the odds, we choose to live along side with COVID 19. Church's celebrations are running for people who want to receive different sacraments. We hear longings from our aging members since they are not allowed to attend church's celebrations. We strictly imposed "No face mask, No face shield, No entry Policy". Human relationships which are nourished when members are gathered together are restricted at this time. Virtual platforms could not replace that physical desire to be with one another. We have officiated weddings which we only keep the essential entourage. Baptisms are celebrated in GKK (*Small Christian Community*) chapels. The Sacrament of the Anointing of the sick is still given but we follow strict health protocols.



Parish life is thriving with the essential pastoral programs to help our faith community to grow and mature. We launched the 5th year celebration of "Laudatu Si". The service leaders have put up a simple nursery. The dream is to encourage those who will be receiving sacraments to plant a tree in their own areas.

During the First Sunday of Advent, we have launched the parish's annual Christmas Fund raising "Light a Star". We are happy that despite of the financial crisis that we are facing, many people have responded to this initiative. The proceeds will be added to the church's construction fund. We successfully finished our nine-day "misa de gallo" with an enormous number of mass goers. Police officers and barangay security leaders have helped us to manage the smooth entrance of the people to the church's compound and to monitor that COVID health protocols are strictly followed.

Our small Marist community has blended very well to the life, needs, crisis and opportunities of the people we are serving. The parishioners miss the presence of Fr. Pat Muckian in the community and in the parish. We have our small celebrations which have made us more aware of our Marist vocation. We celebrated birthdays, religious profession and priesthood anniversaries with an ever renewed enthusiasm and fidelity to continue serving our community and the people in our ministry.

COVID 19 has changed the life of the people around us. We have reevaluated our pastoral approaches. We have gone back to what are essentials in life. These meaningful realizations are well projected in our homilies. We hope that people have rediscovered the essentials in their lives. Those things that combat against virus. The value of faith over fear. The value of family over material things. The value of community over individualism. It is during this time that we become what we are called to do as what God desired for each one of us. "To be a brother and a sister to one another". With this new found realizations, crisis might happen again but we will still choose to live as a community.



Fr. Christopher, Fr. Roque and Fr. Arnold

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Virtual platforms could not replace that deep desire to be with one another.”

Buon Natale!

It is my third Christmas in Rome this year. One of the highlights of the Roman Christmas is the liturgical celebrations officiated by the pope.

Last year's Christmas was more exciting one. I had the opportunity to concelebrate with Pope Francis during the Mass for Filipino community in Rome as part of the Misa de Gallo. Saint Peter's Basilica was filled with Filipino people, full of joys and hopes and prayers.

Due to Covid-19 pandemic crisis, the Vatican and Churches in Rome have either significantly downsized or cancelled some Christmas celebrations and related activities. The Filipinos are sad because we cannot have Mass with Pope Francis. With the presence of Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle in Rome, there might be a low key Filipino style of Christmas celebrations.

Despite the pandemic crisis, the general house puts some Christmas decorations, real Christmas tree and colourful lights inside and outside of the house. I think we can claim that we have the biggest lighted star of David in our neighborhood. In the house we will have the Mexican version of novena prayers led by the Mexican sisters as a spiritual preparation for Christmas. It is called the 'posada'.

One of the excitements is the kris kringle, the exchange of gifts, for those who live in the general house. Despite the restrictions, we have a joyful and meaningful Christmas celebration.

(Fr. Kevin Medilo, SM- General House, Rome)



Happy Christmas from Ireland to Asia

COVID 19 still concerns and effects people in the lead up to Christmas. In Ireland, even politics is never far away. With two different jurisdictions running the island it would have been an unique opportunity to have an all Ireland common COVID policy. This unfortunately did not happen, particularly in border areas, where there is one set of regulations on one side and a different one on the other. Alas the virus operates on both sides. Another concern is the tense Brexit talks that are continuing between the UK and the European Union. We are all praying for a deal otherwise the consequences are too dreadful to consider like loss of thousands of jobs, increased food prices and endless border delays.

As I attended the hospital today for my 4th cycle of treatment, patients and nurses were looking forward to celebrating Christmas. It will be different this year. They seemed content to make the best of it. In St Mary's we are fortunate to have an international opera star singing on Christmas eve, Tara Erraught. She used to sing before in the choir. Churches are putting on extra Masses on Christmas eve and Christmas day. May the great feast of Christ's birth continue to bring peace and love to peoples lives. Wishing you a Happy and Blessed Christmas.

(Fr. Patrick Muckian, SM- Ireland)

