



Chronicles from Manila n°4 *Special Christmas 2007 and New year 2008 Edition*

Summary

As for the contents, this Chronicle will be an account of how we have lived the Christmas season in the Philippines as well as continuing onwards to the New Year, and how the community celebrated these festivities commemorating the Birth of Christ. Then, there will be the usual press review.

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Happy New Year to all of you!



Community of Manila (November 2007)

1. The Christmas Season in the Philippines

■ Lights, ornaments and Christmas parties

As early as September, Christmas ornaments appear in the malls: artificial Christmas trees, colored Christmas balls, garlands, wrapping paper... and tons of toys and pastries. After *All Saints'* and *All Souls'* Days (two of the most popular feast days here when people rush to the cemeteries for a festive reunion with their loved ones), one can already hear Christmas carols in the subway, over the radio and in the malls. Full page-advertisements feature food, gifts or ornaments. Santa Claus is everywhere. Guards at the entrance of the shops and cashiers put on their typical red or green hornet. Then, the unlimited parties: offices, shops, schools, families... each with their own well-prepared ritual. Christmas celebrations usually start with a prayer or a celebration of the Eucharist. After the blessing of the meal, everyone is at table. Then, come the songs and dances, games and gift distribution. The special gifts are distributed by lottery. The celebration will usually end with a prayer or a blessing.

■ Numerous celebrations

On the First Sunday of Advent (four weeks before Christmas), streets and houses were covered with decorations and strings of twinkling lights. These lights were seen everywhere one went. In fact, a friend visiting our house at one point asked if we live next to an electric gadgets store!

In our community, the First Vespers of the First Sunday of Advent was quite significant. Blair Nuyda officially became a postulant and moved to Adveniat House for this stage of his formation, joined Joseph Macalangan who would now enjoy some company in his journey. The whole community felt great joy for such occasion.

Community of Manila (November 2007), from left to right:

1st row: Bro. Alex A. Castro, Joseph V. Macalangan, Bro. Ricky Montanez, Jick Hope C. Orongan, Fr. Jean-Marie Adubangho Chuvi, Glenn Galvez, Bro. Eduardo C. Molina.

2nd row: Rey Desamparado, Blair Nuyda, Fr. Gilles Blouin, Rodol Cervantes, Thomas Lop Vip, Fr. Bernard Holzer, Rowell Casino.



Blair Nuyda, 28 years old, is currently a Class Adviser and a teacher of Literature at Assumption College in San Lorenzo, Makati. Prior to this, he has worked extensively in various publications as contributor, writer and editor. He earned his double Major in Philosophy and Mass Communications from Saint Paul Seminary (cum laude), his Cognate in Education from St. Scholastica's College and some of his units in Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from the De La Salle University in Manila. He has written an undergraduate thesis on the poet Rainier Maria Rilke's Metaphysics of Solitude. His interests include visual and literary arts as well as coffee. He used to manage a leading chain of cafes.

He was among the pilgrims at the canonization of Saint Marie Eugenie and thus was able to visit a number of Assumptionist communities in France and Italy.

Nine days before Christmas, a good number of people takes part each day in a 4:30 am Mass called “Misa de Aquinaldo” or “Misa de Gallo” (at the cock crow) or “Simbang-Gabi” (the rich vocabulary to describe the event indicates how popular this devotion is). The masses are celebrated in honor of the Blessed Mother and for the perseverance of the nation in the faith. The churches are filled with lights, flowers and decorations. The liturgical color is white rather than the traditional purple. The crib lies there, waiting for the Baby Jesus. It is already the beginning of the celebrations... The songs, even the *Gloria*, are sung all out loud, even if the Advent ritual calls for a more sober and intimate liturgy. The churches are packed with people, overflowing on the streets surrounding the church or the chapel.

After the Mass, a light breakfast is served, usually local delicacies of the season.

If one adds to the celebrations to the feasts in honor of the Blessed Mother, the Immaculate Conception on December 8 and Nostra Señora de Guadalupe (Patroness of the Philippines) on December 12, it is easy to imagine how the priests find themselves very exhausted when Christmas comes, notwithstanding the numerous confessions they have to hear and the other sacraments they have to administer!

2. Christmas in the community: A Day to Day Account

The life of the community danced to the beat of this almost continuous festive spirit, for our second Christmas season in the Philippines. Here is a day to day account:



Thursday December 13: First Christmas Party

For us, the Christmas season started this day: our Bishop, Msgr. Honesto Ongtioco, had invited to a Christmas party all the religious and diocesan priests of Cubao, one of the six dioceses of the Greater Manila. Our diocese accounts to 400 priests, most of them belonging to one of the 35 various religious congregations since there are no more than 38 diocesan priests all in all. The feast unfolded as described above, a truly fraternal evening, very much inter-Asian and international.



Friday, December 14: Christmas Celebration for all the Parish Workers and Volunteers

All those involved in the life of our parish, Our Lady of Pentecost, gathered in our garden for their Christmas party and totaled to more than 250 people! The celebration went on until 11:00 pm although it was scheduled to end by 9:30 pm. Thank God! Our neighbors were among the parish volunteers present!



Saturday, December 15: Christmas Celebration with the Children of the Squatter Areas

Most community members were on hand for the Christmas celebration of the catechism classes. Bro. Alex Castro, together with Bro. Ed and two candidates, who animate the catechism classes in this area, tells us about this celebration.



Children during the Christmas Celebration of squatter areas in our parish.



“As an annual activity of the Parish Catechetical Ministry, our parish sponsored a Christmas Party for all the children of all the catechetical classes.

On December 15 at the Barangay Covered Court, children ranging from 6 to 12 years old and numbering about 360 from the four slum areas served by our parish --- were treated with fun and games, food and gifts, and raffle prizes.

The whole morning celebration started with a Eucharistic celebration presided by our parish priest, Fr. Bong. Truly, joy was felt that day! Just like what our parish priest emphasized in his homily to the children, “Joy is the gift of Christmas; it was the greeting of the angel to the shepherds during the first Christmas night and this celebration was our parish's way of sharing this joy to the children of the slum areas under the Parish Catechetical Program.

Most of the members of our community participated in this activity, especially Brothers Ed and Alex, and two of our candidates, Rowell and Rodel who are volunteer catechists. Also present were Fr. Bernard's visitors, Holger Rommen and his wife Kirsten who brought their three children in order to experience a celebration with children from the slum areas.”

In the afternoon, all catechists of the parish met at our place for a pot-luck lunch: it was another moment of fraternal link with some members of our parish.



Sunday, December 16: Christmas at Molave Youth Home (a Juvenile Detention Center)

Members of the community gathered at the Molave Youth Home in Quezon City where Bro. Ricky and one of our postulants, Blair Nuyda have an apostolate every Sunday morning. Here is Blair's report on this special celebration: “Christmas Behind Bars”.

“Christmas behind bars may not exactly be a good idea, especially for the young detainees at Molave Youth Home. They would rather spend it in their respective homes with their families. They would have wanted to go to Church for the traditional Simbang Gabi, exchange gifts with their friends, eat delicious food and simply enjoy the festivities around the city like the rest of their young counterparts.

We, along with the Xaverians, felt that the bars should not be an excuse for them not to encounter Christ. That is why we visit them every week for catechism and formation sessions. For the same reason too did we decide to prepare special activities for them-especially because it is Christmas.

We had to make sure that Christmas celebrations started early for those behind bars. We had to solicit material contributions from different parties who responded with eagerness. Among them were Sr. Estela Marie Roeceles, ra and the Basic Education Division of Assumption College San Lorenzo, Dra. Luz Marie Teresa Garcia, the family of Sr. Giselle Valderrama, ra, the Rommen family and Delfi Foods.

The gifts given were literally a truckload of toiletries such as toothpastes, toothbrushes, soaps and shampoo, mostly from the Assumption San Lorenzo Basic Education Division. There were also a handful of clothes. Days before the celebration, we had to sort these gifts making sure that all 150 detainees will get a share. Some of these toiletries had to be regulated by the prison administration for security purposes.

The Assumptionist and Xaverian communities were present during the Christmas Party. We started with the Eucharist in Filipino presided by the Xaverian Rector, Fr. Eugene from Italy. There were also parlor games, dancing and song numbers. We brought food and drinks as well.

The prison staff was with us that morning and they were also given gifts. It was a good day indeed for all who were there. In fellowship, one recognizes the inherent good in each one no matter which side of the bars you are coming from.”

On that same evening, brothers from the Saint Augustine Center of Studies came for a Christmas caroling and fellowship. It was a moment of fraternal get-together among brothers of the Augustinian Family.



Monday, December 17: Beginning of the Christmas Break

It is the beginning of the break at the university. The candidates at Pavel House promised themselves to participate in every single Misa de Gallo at 4:30 am. The other members of the community chose to participate in other celebrations during the day or in the evening.

All week long, children of the neighborhood came at our door in the early evening to sing carols in exchange for a few candies or some chocolate and on Christmas day itself, since we ran out of candies, for a handful of coins...

During this hectic week, the community received three young professionals for a Discovery Visit: Aldrin from Cagayan de Oro, Ellis from Isabela and Peter from Manila.





Tuesday, December 18: Day of Recollection

It was a quiet day of prayer and silence in the community. Fr. Francis Cruz, C.M., a Vincentian priest, was the facilitator of the recollection. As preparation for Christmas, he made us recall the significant 'Christmases of our past', a celebration that is lived quite differently at the various stages of our lives: childhood, teenage years, at the seminary, as adults, abroad, as a priest, etc... We had a good sharing a few days later in one of our community meeting concerning what we discovered together on that day of reflection. For his afternoon talk, Fr. Francis presented the two very different accounts of the Nativity story in the Gospels according to Luke and Mathew respectively: quite a discovery for some of us.



Wednesday, December 19: A Christmas Vigil in Antipolo

Late afternoon of that day while Fr. Gilles was blessing the newly- renovated building of the local branch of our bank during the Christmas Party of its personnel, the rest of the community headed to Assumption Antipolo, an all-girls school run by the Religious of the Assumption for their annual Christmas Vigil. It began at 8:00 pm and ended at 1:00 am. Various activities were offered to the students: adoration of the Blessed Sacrament in a Taizé ambiance, meditative rosary in the garden, silent prayer, film showing with open forum, personal dialogue with the brothers or the sisters, confession, etc... Everybody got together again at 4:00 am for *Lauds* and the Misa de Gallo with the families in the neighborhood.



Thursday, December 20: "The Mother of all Days"

After a very short night and the early morning Mass, we were brought to San Lorenzo Village, Makati for the blessing and inauguration of a new school building at Assumption College. In the afternoon, we hosted a Christmas Party for the children of Daan Tubo, the squatter area where many of us have our regular apostolate. The gathering took place in the only open space available, in front of the chapel where a family was having a wake for a deceased member: life and death reunited! Bro. Alex reports:



Alex running the Christmas Party of Daan Tubo

"As part of our community's Christmas activity, we sponsored a Christmas party for all the children of Daan Tubo - the squatter area assigned to us by our parish priest.

There were approximately 300 children from the area. The children prepared their own presentations and our community prepared games and raffle prizes. Each child was given a "Niño bag" of candies, chocolates, an apple and a juice drink. In addition to that, more than 150 toys and different children's items were raffled and given away as prizes. Thanks to the generosity of Holger Rommen and his family who gave us the ten boxes of toys.

The "nanay" (mother) leaders of the area prepared a simple "arroz caldo" (chicken porridge) for all the children.

The children were very happy for what they received; and the "nanays" (mothers) were very thankful to us for initiating a Christmas activity with them. One even mentioned that we became their "Santa Claus" during that day.

Indeed, what started as a simple gesture of sharing the Christmas joy to the people of Daan Tubo last year has become an annual and meaningful activity for our community during the Christmas season, especially with our desire to be immersed and to be in solidarity with the poor of our neighborhood."



Friday December 21 and Saturday 22: Let us have a break!

The last two days were rest days and were mainly spent to do last-minute shopping in the malls to purchase our Christmas gifts. Both evenings were highlighted with the Novena Masses, one in our own parish and the other at the chapel of the Jesuits in the Ateneo campus where the Provincial of the Philippines Province celebrated the masses in the presence of the Sumilao farmers (see Press Review).



Sunday, December 23: Christmas in our Community

That morning, Frs. Bernard and Gilles presided a Christmas Mass for the French-speaking community of Manila. The chapel of the sisters at San Lorenzo Village was packed with families and young children. There were new faces in the congregation and many pregnant women as well, who alerted us to a few baptisms in the coming months...



During the afternoon and the evening, our Christmas celebration as a community took place just before people started to head home for family holidays. At 4:00 pm, we started with a sharing on how Christmas has been celebrated in our families. Then the Eucharistic celebration followed during which Bro. Ricky renewed his vows. At 6:00 pm, we had fun games and distribution of gifts before partaking together the sumptuous turkey (thanks, Bro. Alex!) at the lawn of our garden. The evening went on with songs and dances in a very relaxing and happy atmosphere...



Monday, December 24: Christmas Eve with the Assumption Family

Early morning, most of our candidates took off to their respective province for family visits. It was a quiet morning for the others who could spare some time for a more spiritual preparation or wrapping the last-minute gifts, or sending Christmas wishes.

Christmas Eve celebration was with the Assumption Family. The Little Sisters of the Assumption and our community joined the Religious of the Assumption at San Lorenzo, Makati for the First Vespers of Christmas. After a light evening meal, a song practice was conducted. The Christmas Mass was celebrated at 9:00 pm, under the mango trees, in the “Serenity Garden” of the school, with neighboring families and friends present. Before communion, all the members of the Assumption family renewed their vows using a single formula. At the end of the Mass, hot chocolate was offered to all. Becoming a tradition now, the sisters and the religious met for a joyful get-together with French cheese and wine, baguette and pastries. We headed home passed midnight.



Tuesday, December 25: Christmas Day!

On Christmas Day, the community celebrated Mass at the novitiate of the Religious of the Assumption. As a tradition, the sisters invited the children of the neighborhood. Fr. Chuvi presided the mass in Tagalog, with an interactive homily with the children.

At noon, the brothers got together for the Christmas lunch just before the Filipino brothers left for their family holidays for a week until New Year’s Day. The house became more quiet with just a few people left behind: Bernard, Gilles, Chuvi, Thomas, Blair and Jick (one of the candidates). The ones left occasionally accepted a few invitations for dinner outside. One of them was the Silver Wedding Anniversary Celebration of Ara and Hubert in the beautiful church of Las Piñas, famous for its unique bamboo pipe organ.



Wednesday, December 26: Feast of Saint Stephen

That morning, Bernard, Chuvi, Gilles, Blair and Thomas left for Malibay, at the Little Sisters of the Assumption, for the celebration of Saint Stephen, honoring their founder Fr. Etienne Pernet. There were also some sisters of the Religious of the Assumption from the mission school nearby who came for the celebration. This has evolved into yet another family celebration for us in the Philippines.

3. The New Year Celebration in the Philippines



Monday, December 31 2007

One year went by, the other one arrives... In the Philippines, neither of these happens without a feast and celebration.

Early that morning, firecrackers could already be heard all around, even if the Health and Fire Departments vigorously campaigned in the televisions against the reckless use of these firecrackers. Despite this, the people still felt that this was still the best way to drive the evil spirits away before the start of the New Year... The evil spirits must have been quite numerous this year, because there were never so many firecrackers and pyrotechnics of all kinds. At 5:00 pm onwards, the noise drowned out the place and it went on and on.

In the later part of the afternoon, few remaining ones in the community went to Antipolo where we ended year 2007 with our sisters. There was an hour of adoration followed by a Thanksgiving Mass at 9:30 p.m., which was attended by more than 500 children of the poor neighbourhood in the school.

After the table fellowship made up of pastries and fruits, we came back home around 11:00 p.m. with the sight of the first fireworks coloring the sky. It ended at 1:00 am. We had never seen so beautiful and numerous fireworks before. Considering only those from our own neighbourhood, there was enough money spent, which could possibly pay part of our “Asian House”!



While the religious were enjoying the New Year quietly, Thomas Lop Vip, our volunteer, was having a party in Daan Tubo for his first New Year in the country. Let him tell the story himself:

“My first New Year party in the Philippines was indeed special because it was with the people of a squatter area where the Assumptionist community has its apostolate. Though I was invited by a family, I was greeted by dozens of them. Every single door was open and in front of each house the best food and drinks were offered, as an invitation to enter and share. Here and there, in the midst of songs, dances, card games and firecrackers, one could see a family bringing its best food to a neighbor.

Yet, poverty was still very visible and one could be shocked by the amount of money that was being spent in firecrackers, gambling bets and hard liquor. Practically, by 9:00 p.m., there was hardly any man who was not drunk! A group of twenty kids, sometimes in the arms of their mothers, gathered in an open space of the squatter area from where they could watch from a distance the colorful fireworks through the leaves of an immense mango tree located near the wall that separate the rich and the poor. Each time a firecracker would be launched, coupled with its exploding noise and colors, the children would respond in awe, shouts and laughter. At the stroke of midnight, the atmosphere became even more joyous and everyone started to hug his/her neighbors. This lasted until early morning.

All through the night, I accepted all kinds of food and drinks new to me... so much so that I started the New Year feeling sick... but with no regrets. Indeed, after many weeks of being cautious with my dealings with these people, suddenly doors are opened to me as if the festivities had been a key to come close to people...”



Tuesday, January 1 2008: Happy New Year!

At midnight, in keeping with the tradition, we opened a bottle of champagne brought by the Provincial of France a year earlier and that we had promised to keep for a very special occasion. We simply needed now to wait for the end of the noise before going to bed and rest until the morning: it was close to 3:00 am!

The morning was quiet but in the afternoon we joined the Atayde family for a long evening celebration. Each year they gather the ‘clan’ for a whole evening with a Thanksgiving Mass in the garden of their summer place in Antipolo. Then, the event was followed by a bountiful meal (with roasted beef), a lottery for children, and a basketball shooting contest for the young and not-so-young males. Trophies and gifts, music and songs punctuated the rest of the evening (which comes rather early in the Philippines). At 10:00 p.m., a breakfast was served... This signaled the end of the party and everybody started going back home... because the next day was yet another occasion to celebrate.



Wednesday, January 2: Classes Resume

Back to school! A brutal shift! So that Blair could attend Morning Prayer (since he leaves for school quite early), the community decided to pray at 5:45 am... 15 minutes earlier than the previous schedule.



Sunday, January 6: The Epiphany

Christmas celebrations were not yet over... On Feast of the Epiphany, the members of the Adveniat Community and Pavel House were invited to San Lorenzo for the blessing of the newly-renovated chapel of Assumption College. The liturgy was impressive. The Archbishop of Manila, Cardinal Gaudencio Rosales presided the liturgy and was assisted by two main concelebrants: Bishop Jesse Mercado, of the diocese of Parañaque, and our own Superior, Fr. Bernard. The President of the Philippines, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, an alumna of the Assumption, was seated in the front row among special guests and donors. Such a celebration did not come to an end without a meal, some songs and dances!

And the Christmas season would continue until the Feast of the Baptism of Christ, January 13th. Down went the Christmas ornaments and the nativity set that was neatly put away until next year... We are back in the Ordinary Season... The next *Chronicles* will feed you with new adventures...

Happy New year... of the field rat!

On February 7, Asia will celebrate its New Year. A new year for us also with in mind the construction of an "Asian House" for formation and vocations. So, we are not late in wishing you the best for a New Year.



■ A gift dear to our heart

We would like to present to you a project that is dear to our heart this New Year. It would be our own way of supporting the Church in Asia, particularly in China, Myanmar, Indonesia and East Timor, for the formation of their leaders and future priests. Their formation is very difficult in their respective countries.

Our community would like to offer to some of them a home for their studies, close to the main centers of spiritual and theological formation in Manila, and where they would find many other young people in formation from all over Asia. We would offer them the possibility to develop their proficiency in English, a community set-up conducive for study, prayer, sharing and common activities. It will also be for us and our Congregation a means to open up ourselves to the reality of these countries and these Churches.

This «Asian Home», to be built on our property here would offer 22 bedrooms (with toilet and shower), a community lounge, a study room (fully equipped with computers), an oratory, kitchen and dining room, laundry room. The total cost is 13 million pesos (210,000. euros or 300,000. US\$).

The construction would take about eight months. We expect to have our first guests for the school year starting in June 2009. We already have a long waiting list...

If you are interested about this project, please ask us for more information.

You may send your contribution to...

For Europe, in euros: Assomption, 79 Avenue Denfert-Rochereau 75014 PARIS France

For North America, in American or Canadian dollars: Montmartre Canadien, 1679 Chemin St-Louis, QUEBEC G1S 1G5 Canada.

For the Philippines, in Pesos, Augustinians of the Assumption 686-100-197-9 Bank of the Philippine Islands - Katipunan Branch - Loyola Heights - QUEZON CITY - Philippines

If you wish to receive a tax exempt/deductible receipt for your gift, please send your gift to Procure Missionnaire de l'Assomption (Paris) or Montmartre Canadien (Quebec), and indicate clearly on your check "For the foundation in the Philippines".

4. Press Review

■ The President has pardoned 53 officers of the army who had plotted in a mutiny in 2003, so that they could celebrate Christmas with their families...

■ Following a 14-year-old tradition, the President went to Manila International Airport to welcome personally 300 Overseas Filipino Workers coming back from the Middle East for the Christmas season.

■ 55 farmers from Sumilao (Bukidnon) have walked 1,700 km in order to meet with the President and ask her to have their land back, the 144 hectares bought by San Miguel Foods Inc. when the land was declassified as farmland and submitted to agrarian reform. This promise has not been kept yet by the President. The fight for information and disinformation continues...

■ The subway in Manila will be prolonged by 20 km. Thanks to the help of SM (a chain of Chinese-Filipino supermarkets), an Israeli businessman, and the World Bank.

■ In Basilan, 1.800 families flee away from the combat zone between the army and the Moro rebels.

■ The Filipino Film Festival in France: nine short films from the Philippines will be shown at the Clermont-Ferrand Short Film Festival (France), called "the Cannes Festival of the short films industry" this February 2008.



On Christmas Eve, Ferdie Lintuan, 52 years old, a journalist of the radio station DXGO in Davao, is shot dead by a man riding a motorcycle. A prize of 1 million pesos is offered for the capture of the murderer. The journalist was researching on a case of corruption with the newly-opened People's Park in Davao.



Legend:

« Corruption, higher prices, traffic, poverty, politics » (Philippine Daily Inquirer 02/01/08)

400 Filipino volunteers with the Voluntary Service Overseas “Bahagihan” work with poor people in some 40 Third World countries (Africa, Asia, Pacific Islands and the West Indies).

According to a research made with 1,200 families, 16.2% of Filipino families have suffered from hunger in the last quarter of 2007. 3.3% of these families have suffered from food shortage many times during the same period.

One out of three Filipino teenagers (13-15 years old) smokes cigarettes, according to a study of the WHO (World Health Organization). 56% of men smokes in the Philippines, two-thirds of them come from the poorest social class. The budget spent in tobacco is inferior compared to the budget for National Education!

The Philippines ranks fourth as ship manufacturer in the world. Filipinos represent 22% of the sea workforce throughout the world.

The police could not stop illegal street vendors but they asked them to collaborate in chasing robbers in the streets and marketplaces.

January 21st, 2008
Manila - Philippines

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