

Laudato Si' 2020

Theme: "Everything is Connected"

A 9 day Retreat

16 – 24 May 2020



20 May 2020

Capuchin GEM (Green Environment Movement) – JPIC Office - OFM Capuchins

vol. 1 number 5

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Peace and Good.

To commemorate the 5th year anniversary of Laudato Si', we invite you to join us in a 9 day retreat.

Each day, we will provide you with materials from which you can find inspiration. All that is required of you is to provide yourself a few minutes each day to find a quiet place to read and reflect in peace.

For today, Day 5, we have one topic:

1. The Lord Gave Me Brothers!

Happy reading and God bless you always!

Office of the JPIC, OFM Capuchins

1. The Lord Gave Me Brothers!

Two of the most fulfilling parts of my work is when I give inputs to our brothers in initial formation and facilitate their immersions to the indigenous people. The formators understand the importance of early interaction between our young friars and the poor that they often invite me (1) to give inputs to our aspirants during their intensification program prior to postulancy, (2) to accompany our postulants in immersions before going to the novitiate and (3) to give inputs to our postnovices during their Franciscan experiences.

As they enter the postnovitiate, many hearts are already in flames that a number of them would volunteer to go with me to the indigenous people during Christmas vacations, summer vacations and semester breaks. Some of my early formandi who are now theologians have already created a second team of the Capuchin Medical Mission and they go to the Domagat tribes of Nueva Ecija during vacations.

It was December, less than two years before I finally went to Rome, when four postnovices asked their formators if they can accompany me to the Agta communities of Sta Ana, Cagayan during their Christmas vacation. Since these four brothers have carpentry and plumbing skills, we agreed to work together in helping the community improve their water system. We decided to create a 'food for work

scheme' so that the community members who would volunteer to work with us will have something to bring home to their families at the end of the day.

To go to the village, we need to pass through a river which is usually shallow and easy to cross. However, if it rains in the mountains, the river can rise rapidly and become uncrossable.

As we regularly do, we left the mission car on the other side of the river and crossed towards the Agta community. We noticed that thick clouds are already forming in the mountains and the river is beginning to rise. We hurriedly transferred the food and the equipment to the community while it is still possible. Then it started to rain hard and it continued for several days. In a short while, the river became waist deep and only the young Agtas are strong enough to cross it. We postponed the water system project and just did some repairs in the mission house and in the health center.

After two days, the brothers told me that the people no longer have food and are hungry because nobody can cross the river anymore. We distributed some of the food we brought and rationed the rest so that the community will have food for the next few days and no one will get hungry.

The rain lessened but the river remained high. The brothers then informed me that the neighbor of the Agtas is complaining about our mission car and is insisting that we transfer the car immediately to another area. In order to maintain good relationships with the neighbor and avoid future conflicts, we decided to cross the river and move the car. Two brothers from Papua New Guinea are strong swimmers. They volunteered to accompany me.

We started crossing some hundred meters upstream of the irrigation dam. I was one third across the river when the strong undercurrent started pulling me downwards. I calmly told myself that there is a possibility for me to die but not today. So I assessed my situation. I needed to conserve my strength so I just concentrated on keeping myself afloat. I told the brothers that at this rate I will reach the dam before I could cross the river so I will just allow myself to reach the dam and try to continue crossing from there. I made it about halfway across the river by the time I reached the dam. Hno. Nixon, one of the brothers, suddenly appeared beside me. We held hands and try to keep ourselves on the dam. The river was as high as the chest and the current was much stronger. I knew I had only about ten seconds before I will be dragged by the river down the dam. I told brother Nixon that I will have to go down the dam and aim for the reeds. I let go of his hand and started bouncing down the dam towards the reeds. In the reeds, I saw Hno. Nixon again. I told myself quietly that for the sake of this generous brother, I have to keep on going. We were already two thirds across river when we ran out of reeds. We went down the river again to the next cluster of reeds. In the meantime, Hno. Lucas, the other brother, have already made it to the other side and was following us down the river. He pulled us out when we finally reached the edge of the river. A little later, Hno. Nixon told me that in Papua New Guinea, their tribe has a custom of saving friends even if it will cost their life. In short, he was already set on drowning with me. I silently told myself that I am glad I kept on going. My young brothers are just as stubborn as their crazy mentor (me).

We then agreed that Br. Nixon will return to the village. I will bring the car to the convent of the FAS sisters and brother Lucas volunteered to go with me. We watched Br. Nixon cross back to the other side where the other two brothers were waiting.

The next day, Br. Lucas and I returned to the river and the three brothers were waiting for us. They crossed the river even if it was still strong. We gave them fresh supplies and with the help of the Agtas they brought it across. I could see that Br. Lucas is restless and wanted to join them. So I told him to go and join them. He immediately swam to the brothers who were happily waiting for him. The young friars are already on the other side leaving their old mentor enviously looking from afar. I guess it is time to cut the umbilical cord.

In the succeeding days, whenever possible, I would regularly go to the other side of the river and the young brothers would cross the river to get the supplies I bring. The brothers cooked something special for the community on New Year's eve and everyone was happy. When it was time for us to go back to the convent, the river was still high but the brothers and the Agtas were able to find a way of getting our equipment across.

I thank the Lord for the gift of brothers. I believe the time has come for the young eagles to stretch their wings and fly.

As for me, I think I will ride my horse to the sunset in search of further adventures and sing amid the fading light:

"Ay, ay, ay, ay. Canta y no llores. Porque cantando se alegran cielito lindo, los corazones!"

Reflections

To ride a horse into the sunset singing a song would be a good ending to a story but the story cannot end yet. As our father Francis would say to our brothers near the end of his life, *"Let us begin again, brothers, for up until now, we have done little or nothing."*

1. How early in formation should we immerse our brothers among the poor?

I presented the same question before the sisters of the Missionaries of Charity with regards to their sisters in initial formation. They answered, "As soon as possible!"

I believe St. Francis will agree with them. When he started to search for the will of God in his life, St. Francis started to go out of the walls of Assisi and lived among the lepers. He also explored the caves of Mount Subasio. Not long afterwards, he began rebuilding San Damiano which was also outside the walls of Assisi.

When St. Francis was about to die. He had it written in his Testament:

"In this way did the Lord give me, Brother Francis, the grace to begin doing penance: when I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers. And the Lord Himself led me among them and I showed mercy to them. And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was changed into sweetness of soul and body. And afterwards I delayed a little and left the world." – Testament of St. Francis of Assisi

I also agree but we need to always (1) prepare them prior to immersion, (2) monitor them during the immersion while at the same time giving them space away from you and finally (3) process with them their experiences afterwards.

2. What do I tell them before the immersion?

I tell them to expect the worst. In that way, if the situation is really terrible, they can tell themselves: “I am not surprised. I expected this already.” If things are better than they expected. Then it’s a BONUS!

We need to prepare them because there is really the possibility of developing culture shock when a person enters a new culture. So part of the preparation is to tell them what the symptoms of culture shock is.

¹ The common signs of culture shock are:

- > Extreme homesickness
- > Feelings of helplessness/dependency
- > Disorientation and isolation
- > Depression and sadness
- > Hyper-irritability, may include inappropriate anger and hostility
- > Sleep and eating disturbances (too little or too much)
- > Excessive critical reactions to host culture/stereotyping
- > Hypochondria
- > Excessive drinking
- > Recreational drug dependency
- > Extreme concerns over sanitation, safety (even paranoia), and being taken advantage of
- > Loss of focus and ability to complete tasks

When they know the symptoms, they are able to help themselves and each other.

3. What else?

I ask them also to gather for prayer at least once a day. I encourage them to spend the rest of the day with their foster families.

At least, one of the brothers should send me and their formator through ‘text message’ an update of their situation at the end of each day.

Finally,

One time, I brought with me a group of big young friars. Their immersion was among a tribe whose houses happened to be small. When we were already distributing the brothers to their foster families, one lady was afraid to welcome the brothers. She said, “*Baka masira ang bahay namin*” (I am worried that our house will get destroyed).

May the Lord bless us, protect us from all evil and bring us to everlasting life. Amen.

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¹ <https://www2.pacific.edu/sis/culture/pub/1.6.1- Common Reactions.htm>