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Availability: The Spirit of Our Ministry

Raymond Ugwu, CSSp

My desire to “go teach all nations” was re-affirmed when news of the first group of Spiritans in the Philippines came to us in the Seminary in Nigeria: they built “Nipa” huts and churches, and tree houses, and they made ways where there seemed to be no way. This touched my adventurous spirit and inspired in me a desire for the Philippine mission. When the time came for me to apply for my first appointment, without hesitation I choose the Philippines



because of the new Spiritan focus on Asia, the internationality of the group, their contributions to the diocesan seminary, their move to begin a formation programme, their ministries to the sick, the imprisoned, the youth, the Filipino-Chinese and the mountainous people of Dikila-an and environs.

Without much preparation about the people and their cultures, I arrived in the Philippines on September 10, 2004, exactly two months after my Ordination on July 10, 2004. My first night brought me face to face with a new language, new food, new culture and people and customs. The following Sunday we went to where I was to spend six months in the Philippines learning the Cebuano language which is widely used in the remote region of Mindanao. During my time in the language school, I stayed three months in a Chinese-Filipino Parish, Obrero-Davao City. I also had a week's language practice in Calidngan parish in Cebu Province. These exposures made me appreciate the people's way of living, thinking, culture and civilization. It also equipped me to face the ongoing tension necessitated by the way they practiced their Christianity and what I was used to at home.

After the five weeks practical exposure to Filipino families and basic Ecclesial Communities in Cebu, I finally came home to Iligan, the Spiritan mission land in the Philippines. Here my official assignment is to be the chaplain of two colleges: The Lyceum of Iligan Foundation (which is purely for the college students) and the Iligan Capitol College (which houses both college, high school and elementary departments). My work here includes monthly celebration of the Eucharist, Spiritual direction, organizing recollection and retreats for the students.

Teaching ministry

One day, the rector of the philosophy college seminary asked me, "Are you ready to teach in our seminary?" I agreed at once because the request actualized my desire to contribute to the intellectual, moral and spiritual formation of students searching for happiness, knowledge, truth, and meaning in life. So I teach a variety of courses to the young men in the seminary who are in training for the priesthood.

Though teaching ministry is not easy, it offers me joy, happiness, an opportunity to study and reflect, and to serve God and



Above: Chibuike Ojilere, CSSp serves in prison ministry in the Philippines.

Facing page: Raymond Ugwu, CSSp — "Working with youth keeps you always youthful."

humanity. Due to our different cultural background, and because of some institutionalized academic standards, both I and the students struggle to understand the other's way of life, language, principles and ethics. These obstacles teach professors and pupils to accept the setbacks, frustrations and objective discipline found in any formation process.

When not teaching in the Seminary, I am available to replace any of my Spiritan brothers if they have to be absent from their mission. Being a "Mobile Pari" has helped me gain experience of many types of ministry.

Hospital ministry

For more than two months, I was the acting chaplain of the Mercy Community Hospital run by the Missionary Sisters of Mercy. There, we administer the sacraments to the sick and those who take care of them, bringing Christ to them on their sick bed, give them hope, comfort and strength to share in Christ's sufferings, and help them to understand suffering as a mystery and to bear their pain more bravely. At the same time we minister to the spiritual needs of the doctors, the sisters and other staff dedicated to helping the sick in their struggle for life, and against sickness and death.

Youth ministry

Working with youth is a ministry that keeps you always youthful, current with the time, alive and active. It leaves you with an ever exciting experience of growing up. For four months in 2005 and since February 2006, I serve as Chaplain in a youth center called Catholic Center Campus Ministry run by sisters of the Company of Mary. It is a center for students from different colleges who come there for spiritual enrichment. This ministry keeps me working and thinking about the welfare of students, how to liberate them from all vulnerable and dangerous exposure, and how to bridge the age old gap in communal living caused by years of religious suspicion between the Muslims and Christians.

The challenge of this work is the constant struggle to understand the day-to-day life, language, interest, signs and symbols of the youth. How do I penetrate the youth circle, articulate and understand their problems, inner fears, shyness, loneliness, old hurts, and feelings of inadequacy, awkwardness and love? How do I open up new possibilities for them to understand themselves, to encounter new depths in life, and to gain support and trust? In my homilies, retreats and boarding house meetings, as well as in social gatherings, I try to bring this about.

Prison ministry

This is another ministry I have been doing during my time in Iligan. This is because it helped me to realize the plight of prisoners and their families, to see the prison community as a community of God's children and it pulled me away from an initial "I don't want to get involved" attitude. From September 2005 to January 2006, as the acting chaplain of Iligan City Jail I became a prisoner, not in chains but in ministerial association with prisoners, prison staff, prison volunteers and prison dependents. Together we formed the prison society which participated in the suffering of the inmates. Hence, I thought like a prisoner, thought for the prisoners, acted like a prisoner and worked with the prisoners and prison associates.

However, accepting this ministry was not so easy when my mind was set on the fact that prisoners are receiving due punishment for the offenses they committed, and so don't merit protection and care. But daily encounter with them and listening to their stories has given me a new understanding of who a prisoner is, someone who deserves mercy, concern, kindness and protection.

In Iligan City Jail, the living conditions are dreadful, yet with different activities like games, talent shows, songs and dances, catechism classes and the Eucharistic celebration, we kept ourselves busy, alive and

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happy. The challenge in this ministry is getting volunteers and financial support to take care of the sub-human living condition of the inmates, the slow judiciary process and rehabilitation of the ex-convicts.

Parish ministry

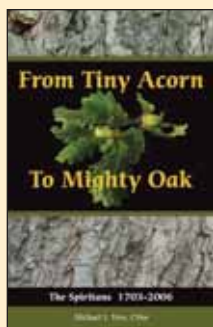
In Iligan, the Spiritans take care of two parishes, one in the mountains and the other in the city, and for six separate weekends, I supplied in the absence of their pastors. The one in the mountains is a mission of primary evangelization. There, the parishioners are poor tenants taking care of the rice fields, banana and coconut plantations of their land owners. The parish of Our Lady of Fatima, Dikila-an, is made up of thirty-two out stations set apart by mountains and streams. My first experience in this mountain made me realize how difficult the missionary vocation can be. It is this experience that I call my "missionary Baptism of fire and the Holy Spirit". On that day, I had to be driven for

forty minutes and had to hike for fifty-two minutes to minister to the people. The weekly collection is less than five dollars and the basic necessities of life cannot be easily found. I may end up spending fifteen dollars or more helping the needy, the sick and the financially pressed.

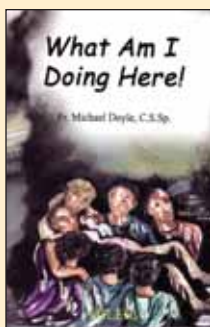
The Resurrection of the Lord Parish, Pala-O, is a city parish for the Filipino-Chinese living in Iligan. It helps to bond the Filipino-Chinese together and to uphold their Chinese spirituality and heritage in line with the gospel message as adopted by the Philippines church. Ministering to a community like this opened me up to another cultural world view and way of life.

To call me a "rolling stone which gathers no moss" might be a name befitting such a "mobile pari" as me, but my eighteen months contribution to the Spiritan mission and presence in Iligan-Philippines has been a fruitful, enjoyable and enriching experience. It has been a great experience with ever unfolding joy and inspires me with zeal to do more whenever the opportunity comes. Thanks to this "missionary availability", the propelling force of our ministry, and my confreres who have always inspired, encouraged, supported, motivated, and challenged me to forge ahead in this evangelical mission of God in the Philippines, I look forward to many fruitful years in this small corner of the Lord's vineyard. ■

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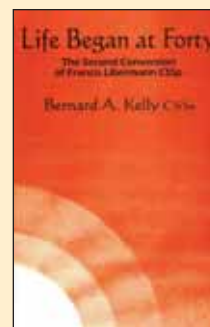
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