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“Joyful in hope, constant in prayer”: With the Father in Cebu Oakridge Pavilion

The general audience held at the Oakridge Pavilion on Friday, August 4, 2023 highlighted the Prelate's stay in Cebu.

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Excitement was high upon learning late June that the Prelate of Opus Dei was coming to the Philippines and

that he would have a general audience in Cebu on August 4, 2023. Word spread and we learned that people from other parts of the Visayas and Mindanao were coming for that event.

It was not easy to find an appropriate venue that could accommodate around 800 people since at that time most of the places had already been booked months ahead. But through prayers, the best venue was found - Oakridge Pavilion, a 910-square-meter air-conditioned permanent tent in Mandaue. The owners, the Liu family, have been supportive of the activities organized by Opus Dei in Cebu and they graciously offered their place for the special gathering.

The most awaited day arrived. The doors to the Pavilion opened at 2 pm and the feel of a family gathering grew as more and more people arrived. There were greetings and

introductions. Friends, colleagues, young and old had come together for the same purpose: to hear the Prelate of Opus Dei, to share stories, and listen to the others' stories.

The place was artistically decorated. The stage had a living room setting with accents of handcrafted furniture made from indigenous materials. The ceiling drapes of white symbolized the vast seas that embrace Cebu. The stage backdrop was a large tarpaulin image of the sardine run in Moalboal (Cebu), whose synchronized dance symbolizes unity and finding one's place in life. The *Madonna Alpenland* presided on a table adorned with red roses and birds of paradise. Tropical flowers of various colors in every corner of the stage completed the set.

The Prelate's car arrived at Oakridge Business Park at 4:35 in the afternoon. He was received by the

Liu family and they all proceeded to greet our Lord in the tabernacle of the Holy Family Chapel located in the compound. The Father would comment later in the get-together about how pleased he was to find the Blessed Sacrament in Oakridge. He spent some time with the Liu's in the lounge adjacent to the Chapel while waiting for the get-together to begin.

Enthusiasm grew in the Pavilion, knowing that the Father had arrived. The emcees, Randy, a PAREF Springdale Board member, and his co-host June, a well-known host and voice talent, gave the final announcements preparing for the Prelate's entry at 5:00 pm.

The Father received a resounding applause from the crowd composed of members of Opus Dei, cooperators and friends who were from Cebu, Iloilo, Dumaguete, Bohol, Bacolod,

Leyte, Davao, Cagayan de Oro, and Butuan.

Holy Eucharist, Prayer, and the Pope

The Father started by thanking God and Saint Josemaria for the apostolic work of Opus Dei in Cebu. He encouraged those present to be people of the Eucharist and of prayer.

He shared that he was pleasantly surprised to find the Blessed Sacrament in the beautiful chapel of Oakridge. God's presence in the Eucharist, in the world and in our souls in grace gives us the strength to accomplish many things in our work, family duties, and other obligations, and to sanctify them, the Father said. We receive so much help from him and it should give us "much hope, security, and joy," he added.

The Father recalled that St. Paul summarized the Christian's attitude in life as "joyful in hope" and "constant in prayer." He gave us the assurance that "God always listens to us." Even if at times it seems that he is not responding to our petitions, prayer is never useless. Jesus himself told his disciples: "Ask and you shall receive." And many times, without our realizing it, we receive much more than what we asked for.

Before beginning the interaction, the Prelate asked us to pray for the Pope and his intentions. Some people have an adversarial attitude towards him, but the Holy Father is someone we have to love, he begged us. With this call for unity with the Pope, he asked that we speak to him about whatever we liked.

Randy reminded the Father that the last time he was in the country in 1998, there were as yet no centers of

the Work in Mindanao, but now “people from those centers are all here for you.” This comment elicited enthusiastic applause.

Two Fernandos

Bert and his wife Melfer, welcomed Msgr. Fernando Ocariz, by recalling that 500 years ago, *Fernando de Magallanes* (Ferdinand Magellan) came to share the Christian faith to the people of Cebu. Melfer declared: “Now another Fernando is here! But this time it’s different: to help and motivate us to share the faith with others more.” That remark elicited applause and cheers.

Melfer narrated the story of the first baptisms in Cebu in 1521, as three students of PAREF Southcrest wearing ethnic costumes gave the Father framed photos of the three gifts Magellan gave to King Humabon and his wife, Queen Juana, the first Filipino converts to the faith: the *Sto*

Niño, the image of *Nuestra Senora de Los Remedios*, and that of the *Ecce Homo*.

Conversion and fidelity

Mariane, a PAREF Southcrest teacher who recently met an accident and was in a wheelchair, gave the Father a “hug from afar” and shared that there are four Korean girls and one Filipina among her students who expressed their desire to be baptized. Two of her Korean students were dressed in their national attire. They came forward, each holding a baptismal candle, and asked the Father’s blessing so they may be baptized soon.

Mariane shared that she and a group of students would teach catechism to children in a tenement housing area. Two girls from that place received their First Communion and were there to give the Father a basket of *pusó* (rice cooked in woven coconut

leaves) to signify their unity and fidelity to Christ.

Unsent letters

Cathy narrated that she had this curious habit of writing letters to people who had made an impact on her - negatively or positively - as a way to process her thoughts and feelings. She would not send those letters. From an unsent letter she wrote to the Father on July 12, 2019, she read: "Father, I am your daughter so I know I can freely write what I want... I saw you traveling to different places visiting the people of the Work. I am always happy to see you smile. I pray for you: that you will have more strength, wisdom and charisma. I pray for your safe travels and that one day I will see you in the Philippines."

Cathy interjected that she was happy to have her wish granted because the Father is now with his children in the

Philippines and “in this beautiful island of Cebu!” The charming intervention delighted everyone. Cathy asked if she could still send him her unsent letters.

The Father told her that she could send him all the letters she wanted - all that she had written and those that she will write in the future. Then he made her consider that her writing letters without sending them, was somehow like prayer. When one prays, she ponders things and tells the Lord the things that she has in her heart.

St. Josemaria boys

Ten young boys, one a little over one year old, came up front dressed in black cassock like St. Josemaria, complete with faux glasses. They approached the Father - some confidently, others hesitatingly - and gave him their “blessing.” Judith, who works in PAREF Southdale pre-

school, introduced them as the St. Josemaria boys. It all started when a mother who had a devotion to the founder of Opus Dei dressed up her son in this attire for a school event. Other mothers liked the idea and followed suit.

Amused, the Father blessed them and said that his blessing was not so that they would become priests. It would be wonderful if some become priests, but his blessing was for them to be good Christians and for them to be happy.

A mother of nine

Rosing is a mother of nine and her husband is a farmer. She told the Father that their only ambition in life was to see their children happy: for her assistant numerary daughter to be faithful to her vocation; for her seminarian son to become a priest and die as a priest; and for them to effectively care for their seven-year-

old son who cannot walk. Many of her children are graduates of BCPD and CITE, technical schools run by members of Opus Dei.

The Father was moved and sent his blessings to Rosing's family. He asked her to thank God for the family she had been given and talked about the effectiveness of parents' prayers for their children. Even when the children are already older and have seen their path in life, parents continue to play their role as father and mother to them. "Even if your help is limited to prayer, that's already a lot. It may seem little, but it is a lot," he told Rosing. He encouraged her to continue praying for her children, that they be faithful to their vocation and to God's plan for them.

Songs

Randy started singing the first lines of "*Eres Tu*" and invited the Father to

have a duet with him. It made the Father laugh; he cleverly deflected the request by praising Randy's beautiful voice.

The banter provided the occasion for Randy to introduce a choral group composed of professionals from all sectors. Initially, the choir was formed to sing in Sunday Masses and other events. They gained prominence because of their singing in the Masses celebrating the June 26 feast of St. Josemaria in Cebu. They thus decided to call themselves the “St. Josemaria Escriva Chorale.”

The group delivered a superb upbeat rendition of the song “*Kruhay*,” a word from Panay island that is the equivalent of “*Long Live*” in English and “*Viva*” in Spanish. The song energized the audience, whose sentiments were truly that of “*Kruhay, Father!*”

Blindness and faith

The festive mood was somewhat subdued as Diane narrated how her husband Mari's blindness has made him a source of encouragement for other parents. One father confided to them that he was getting disappointed by what he would see in his son and was discouraged by his inadequacies as a dad, but after hearing Mari speak in an Educhild session about his personal challenges, he became determined to work better at his being a father.

Mari told the Father that he wanted to speak in Spanish because he wanted to speak from the heart. "Blindness is not easy. It is a burden," Mari said. "Father, I pray to God many times so that He opens my eyes. Sometimes He seems to be there, listening to me. Other times, He seems not to be there. But I know that He listens. Please pray for me so that my suffering may be a path for me to go to heaven."

Diana and Mari approached the Father on stage and asked that he bless the prayer card of our Father in braille so that it would serve as a spur in furthering their apostolic work with families.

The Father comforted them:

"Bartimaeus comes to mind after listening to you," he said. "Be always in the presence of God, knowing that He is always with you and you are not alone. The Lord is guiding you." He told Mari that humanly we cannot understand why God allows blindness, but with faith we can see the positive side of things. He urged Mari to offer his difficulties and sufferings to God, and this will serve as a pillar and a strong support that will sustain the entire Church.

A supernumerary couple

Sona and Nikhil, both of Indian descent, shared their journey of faith and love. Sona is a convert from

Hinduism and they met through an online dating app which ended with both of them receiving the grace of a vocation to the Work and their getting married. Sona related that her husband met the Work through her but, to her surprise, he joined the Work ahead. She told the Father that they just celebrated their first wedding anniversary. They will be moving to Mumbai (India) and to Canada in the future. She added: "Despite the uncertainty of the future, we are consoled with the idea of being part of the family of Opus Dei, so we can receive the support needed in raising a family, and in helping other families."

They invited the Father to visit India. The Father responded that he was not certain when that would happen and teased them saying that by the time he gets to go to India, they may already be in Canada. He reminded them to bank on the communion of

the saints and that wherever we are, we are always accompanied by the Work and by the Church. He invited them to help build the Church and to transmit the spirit of the Work in Mumbai, Canada, and wherever they may find themselves. He congratulated them on their first wedding anniversary.

It had been almost an hour and the Father said that it was time to end. We had enjoyed every minute of the gathering and time passed quickly.

Bato Balani sa Gugma

Thamar and Lovella Tan, both supernumeraries, told the Father that together with their daughter Claire, they sing in a parish choir as a concrete way to promote family apostolate because they believe that “the family that sings together stays together.” They offered to sing for the Father a song entitled “*Bato Balani sa gugma*” (Magnet of Love), a

song dear to the hearts of the Cebuanos. It is a lullaby prayer to the *Santo Niño*.

As they sang, their daughter Claire went toward the stage dancing with an image of the *Sto Niño*, which she gave to the Father at the end. It was moving to behold everyone singing and serenading the *Sto. Niño*, swaying with their hands in unison, many with the smartphone lights on, as the lights in the Oakridge Pavilion were dimmed. The song expresses the Cebuano soul and never fails to move people.

The group singing culminated the memorable gathering. The Father stood up and thanked everyone for making him feel so much at home. “We are a family,” he reminded them, and he gave them his paternal blessing.

This get-together with the Prelate of Opus Dei made us reflect on how

deep the Catholic faith has taken root in the Philippines. It was moving to witness the love that the people of the Visayas and Mindanao have today for the Christ Child, a heartfelt devotion that has passed through the generations, from 500 years past.

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