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"Omnia in Bonum": With the Father at the MOA Arena

The Prelate of Opus Dei had a one-hour gathering with families, members of Opus Dei and their friends at the Mall of Asia (MOA) Arena on Sunday, 30 July 2023.

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The announcement over a month ago that the Prelate of Opus Dei would come to the Philippines sparked anticipation of a general audience

with him that would highlight his 12-day stay. The last trip of the Prelate to the Philippines was in 2008. It was then Bishop Javier Echevarria who had a general audience at the SMX Convention Center.

Intermittent torrential rains had flooded parts of Metro Manila for days, but they did not dampen the spirits of the crowd — estimated at 7,000 persons — that converged on the Mall of Asia Arena in the morning of Sunday, July 30.

"Notwithstanding the size of the venue and the number of people, the atmosphere was warm and intimate," a mother remarked, sharing the sentiments of all.

The set design of the stage was that of a living room with couches and chairs. Native trees lined the sides. The backdrop was an underwater photograph of corals and fish at the world-famous Tubbataha Reef, a

UNESCO World Heritage Site in the middle of the Sulu Sea. The backdrop alluded to one of St. Josemaria Escriva's favorite Gospel passages in which our Lord tells Peter and the disciples to "Put out into the deep" (cf. Luke 5:4) — a call to deepen one's spiritual and apostolic life.

Msgr. Fernando Ocariz entered the hall amid the sounds of Filipino folk music and cheers of "Mabuhay!" ("Viva!" in Tagalog) and "We love you Father!" from the enthusiastic crowd.

They settled down and the Father (as he is familiarly addressed) started by reflecting on the Gospel of that Sunday. "*Omnia in bonum!* All things work together for the good," he said. Despite suffering, difficulties and our personal weaknesses, "let us discover that God is always with us," he said

and that this will be the source of our security and happiness.

In a sign of filial love shared with St. Josemaria and all his successors, Msgr. Ocariz then asked the audience to pray for Pope Francis. "We are not exactly aware of what issues he has to resolve, but we can imagine that he carries a great weight in his mind and heart," Msgr. Ocariz said. He recalled the many times Pope Francis would ask people to "Pray for me!" It was not a routine statement from the pope. "He counts on the prayers of each one," Msgr. Ocariz said.

Then he asked the people to tell him things. The much-awaited interaction began.

Sanctifying human activities

Ana said she knew that the Father played tennis. She asked him to talk about sports as a metaphor for life

and how she could be more passionate about sports.

The Father responded by saying that human activities like sports and work can be transformed into a dialogue with God. "Offer everything to God, even sports," he said. "We encounter God above all in the Eucharist and prayer, but we encounter Him in all human activities." He is always with us and we should make the effort to be with Him.

It was then that a father and son walked up to the Father on stage to gift him with a tennis racket, to the amusement of the crowd.

A businessman and a husband

Ed, a businessman, described the trials his businesses went through in the past years: fire, volcanic eruption, the pandemic and then his wife suffering a stroke.

"For three years now, my professional work has been to take care of my wife, Corazon," Ed said. Gesturing to her in a wheelchair beside him, he continued: "She is with me now and, thanks be to God, she is getting better. And our businesses are beginning to recover."

After blessing them from the stage, Msgr. Ocariz said that what came to his mind listening to Ed's story, was "divine filiation." Knowing ourselves to be daughters and sons of God is the basis of the spirit of Opus Dei and of Christianity itself. He explained that difficulties and trials make us like Christ on the Cross who chose to accept suffering freely. Divine filiation, he added, helps us accept suffering cheerfully.

A girls' club as a legacy

Nora, an assistant numerary organizing activities for the "Rosas Girls Club," told the Father about this

project that was founded by a woman supernumerary, now deceased. Her son and daughter continue to support the club, which teaches children catechism and livelihood skills.

Six young girls then performed a native dance, called "Itik-Itik", imitating ducklings (*itik* in Filipino) happily jumping and flapping their wings. They capped their performance by lining up to greet the Father by pressing his hand to their foreheads in the "mano po" gesture of respect for parents and elders.

Evangelization through film and television

Mel, a respected scriptwriter for television and movies, said that she works hard to imbue her scripts with Christian values. She asked how writers and other creative persons could persevere in their work,

swimming against the current of a secularized media industry.

The Father told her that she is involved in something very important. He advised her to continue dealing personally with producers, directors, financiers and celebrities; to stay connected and become friends with people who have great influence in her field.

Abandonment and prayer

Zita's second baby was diagnosed with a pulmonary disease and had difficulty breathing. After months of medical treatment, in and out of the hospital, she and her husband decided to allow his body to recover naturally, praying to Blessed Alvaro del Portillo for his healing.

Gesturing to the baby who was shouting in his father's arms, she said: "As you can see, Father, he is already doing very well." She asked

how to be serene and prayerful amid trials.

"It is a question of faith. *Omnia in bonum!*" the Father replied. "Christ said 'ask and you shall receive.'

Continue praying because nothing is lost in prayer," the Father said. Being a mother concerned for her child, he advised her to petition our Blessed Mother when difficulties come, and also to ask her to increase our faith that God is with us. "She will increase our faith because she is our Mother."

Chinese Filipino apostolate

Ace, a Chinese Filipino, first spoke in Fukien and then in English, saying he was very happy that the Father was here, adding — to the crowd's delight — that he should "come more often".

He talked about Frontier Development Group and their monthly recollections and classes in

Manila's Chinatown. He mentioned that through generous benefactors, they have managed to get priests from mainland China to do their ecclesiastical studies in the Philippines, Spain and Rome. The audience erupted in applause as he was speaking.

"Very soon, we will have an activity center in Chinatown. Father, we have made the *Mandatum Novum* ("New Commandment") in Chinese for that future center. We would like you to put the Chinese seal on it," Ace said.

He and three other Chinese Filipinos then brought a scroll with the *Mandatum Novum* painted in Chinese calligraphy for Msgr. Ocariz to stamp with his signature in Chinese.

They sang the Chinese folk song, *Yue liang dai biao wo de xin* (The Moon Represents My Heart). Ace explained: "We wish to tell you that whatever the distance between us here in the

Philippines and you in Rome, there will always be a moon to represent our affection for you." The song brought tears to many.

Generosity

Talking about a recent outreach activity her friends conducted for the blind, Jennifer said that she became grateful for good health. She asked about the value of generosity.

"Generosity produces joy," Msgr. Ocariz said, encouraging her to persevere in acts of service, especially for the less fortunate. He reminded her of what St. Josemaria said: "In order to be happy in this world, you don't need a comfortable life, but a heart that is in love."

Super-cooperator and vocation

Raffy and his wife are cooperators of Opus Dei. He prefaced his question by asking if he could be a "super-

cooperator” for life. (Cooperators are not members of Opus Dei; supernumeraries are.) That comment elicited laughter and applause.

"Joking aside," Raffy continued, "How would one know if the Lord is calling him to be a supernumerary?"

In response, the Father explained: "Everyone has a vocation. God has a plan in his mind for each person." St. Josemaría, he reminded them, preached that we are all called to holiness. It is up to each individual to discover the path to holiness to which God is calling him or her.

The Prelate explained that when it comes to discerning one's vocation, God allows some element of uncertainty because He wants each one to decide freely; to take a leap of faith to give one's life to Him with generosity. Upon hearing that call, each one ought to take that leap of faith intelligently, with the help of

prayer and the guidance of a spiritual director. "All of us have a vocation and what God calls us to is the best for us to become saints," the Prelate said.

'It's you'

Capping the eventful morning was a performance by the world-renowned "Philippine Madrigal Singers."

Mark, conductor of the group, spoke about how he met the Work during his college years. He expressed appreciation for the friendships and continuing formation he has been receiving from the Work since the 1980's.

Music, he told the Father, "is in every Filipino." Music unites and brings peace, he said, as he presented the choir, which serenaded the Father and the audience with three memorable songs: "*Eres tú*" (It's you), "*Kay Ganda ng Ating*

Musika" (Filipino for "How beautiful is our music") and "*Permission to Dance*" (originally by the Korean band BTS) which got many in the crowd to sing, clap, and sway to the beat.

Before the Father gave his blessing to end the gathering, in true Filipino fashion, there was a group photo. Photographers rushed to the stage to take the group picture with the Father and the entire MOA Arena crowd in the background. The Father gave his blessing to all and visibly happy he ended saying, "*Muchas gracias!*"

It would be an understatement to describe it as a wonderful family gathering, particularly considering the heartfelt messages exchanged, the music, the laughter and tears, and its anticipated spiritual fruit in the years to come.

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