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Reliving our university years in Rome, “ubi Petrus, ibi Ecclesia”

The First Grand Alumni
Homecoming of the Pontificia
Università della Santa Croce at
the Makiling Conference
Center, Calamba, Laguna on
July 22-25, 2024

09/15/2024

St. Josemaria once expressed a wish
for his sons and daughters in Opus
Dei, which now has been made their

own by every single Catholic who has read his classic work, *The Way*: “I want you to be very Roman. And to be anxious to make your ‘path to Rome,’ *videre Petrum* — to see Peter” (*The Way*, 520). It is in this respect that all of us who have had the great privilege of studying at the *Pontificia Università della Santa Croce* have become Roman. When we were there, the dome of St. Peter’s Basilica, visible from the university, was a constant reminder of the aspiration *omnes cum Petro* (all with Peter). After all, *ubi Petrus, ibi Ecclesia* (where Peter is, there is the Church).

Years after studying in Rome, we are now back in our respective countries and have devoted ourselves tirelessly to the pastoral ministry. From the City that stood for the universal Church, each one went to their specific particular Church.

Innumerable things have happened since then. God chose to channel his

graces to his own people through unworthy vessels such as we are.

Now we have come together once more to relive our days in Rome. The Homecoming was a timely occasion to pause. *Ciao! Da quanto tempo!* Many of us had not seen each other for decades. Those who were young students before have now become venerable parish priests, *monsignori*, rectors, vicars general, and even bishops. Reminiscing the past while cracking old jokes, we became young at heart again.

Bringing the *alma mater* to the alumni

Homecomings are preferably held at the physical venue of the *alma mater*, but considering how prohibitive that arrangement would be in making our homecoming possible, we opted for the next best thing, which was to make the *alma mater* “come” to the alumni. That is, of course, by means

of her representatives, who were our dear formators. Perhaps that was just as well. In the end, what matters is the people. Home, after all, is where your friends are. Besides, our formators are the ones who literally carried out the duties of “nourishing mother” during our university days. An alumnus recalled gratefully how a formator visited him in the hospital every day until he was discharged (a whole month later). He felt the fatherly (and motherly) care of his formator. He felt well-accompanied then, and just like him we can all agree that we continue to feel accompanied now, as we welcome our formators to the Philippines.

In this sense, our professors are extraordinary. They are not only experts in their respective fields and not only consultants in the different Vatican dicasteries, but they are also very accessible people despite the heights they have reached. They

have the heart of good shepherds who truly care for the flock entrusted to them. They were our spiritual directors who emphasized to us that what really matters is personal holiness. Aside from the countless fatherly conversations with them, they “spoke” to us through their actions as we saw them praying, going to confession, celebrating the Holy Mass piously, and treating everyone with charity. They walked their talk.

No wonder, when the *First Grand Alumni Homecoming* was announced last year, we eagerly awaited their arrival. A group chat was created. Volunteer-alumni came to help in the preparations. The alumni registered. After a long wait, the big day finally came!

Msgr. Mar Castillo, the parish priest of St. John the Baptist Parish, prepared everything so well. A police

escort accompanied the Cardinal Archbishop of Manila to and from the venue. Upon arrival, a musical band welcomed him. Before the Mass, we had a special program at the parish's Event Center.

Being the Apostolic Administrator of the diocese, Bishop Mylo welcomed the Cardinal. The city mayor, who is a descendant of the national hero, Dr. Jose Rizal, gave his welcome remarks as well. Fr. Alexes Villarubin gave a wonderful testimony of his Roman experience which he summarized in three points: *universalit , santit , e amicizia*.

After the program, we went to the church for the Opening Mass, which was presided by His Eminence, Jose Cardinal Advincula, the Archbishop of Manila. Bishop Mylo Hubert Vergara, the Vice-President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the

Philippines, and our alumnus, Bishop Oscar Florencio of the Military Ordinariate of the Philippines, concelebrated as well. Together with them were the Rector of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, our dear Fr. Luis Felipe Navarro, and two former formators and professors who are now based in the Philippines, Fr. Julio Dieguez and Fr. Jun Bermejo. The rest of us – forty-two alumni – happily concelebrated the Holy Mass, too.

The church was brightly lit and beautifully decorated. Hundreds of parishioners welcomed us. The choir rendered prayerful church songs. Probably due to the confluence of many factors, one cannot but feel the solemn presence of God in the church. It was a touching experience and a good culmination of our spiritual recharging that began in the recollection in the morning.

At the Makiling Conference Center

The recollection opened with the Sacrament of Confession. Priests were available at the confessionals right outside the beautiful oratory of Makiling Conference Center. As we entered the chapel, we were reminded of the same liturgical and pious care that we saw in the *Collegio Ecclesiastico Internazionale Sedes Sapientiae* and in the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross. The chapel had a solemn touch that made us feel the loving presence of God.

We attended a series of spiritual conferences given by our dear formators and by our older alumni. One of the preachers said, “Humility consists in accepting that God loves us, not because we are good, but because He is good... We should be men with ardent desires of serving God, of loving Him, of holiness, of spreading the Gospel around us.”

What memories these moments brought us! The good, old spiritual topics struck a chord in our hearts. To be sure, everyone was saying the same things interiorly. Yes, we want to pursue holiness with a renewed vigor! Yes, we want to love Jesus even more ardently! Yes, we want to work more zealously in the vineyard of the Lord!

After the recollection and the Opening Mass, we formally established our alumni association. We elected our officers, who came from the different dioceses of the Philippines. Bishop Oscar Florencio was elected President.

There was an interesting proposal from the alumni to hold the next homecoming at *home* – in Rome! And since 2025 is a Jubilee Year, why not – some people suggested – do a *Camino de Santiago* on the way to Rome? The President of the Filipino priests-

alumni association of the *Universidad de Navarra* also happened to be with us, and he liked the idea of a joint *Camino de Santiago* between the two universities, after which each group would then proceed to each one's *home*, which is either Pamplona or Rome.

These exchanges were enhanced by cheese, chips, wine, and other delicacies courtesy of Msgr. James Contreras. Msgr. Jerry Bitoon also brought the famous *lechón*. To the pleasant surprise of everyone, a former violinist of the Philippine Philharmonic Orchestra, Fr. Anthony Reyes, who is an alumnus of our university, rendered several musical pieces. He was accompanied by Fr. Rustam Sabularse and Mr. Carlo Florendo. We also watched the video messages of Msgr. Pedro Huidobro and Fr. Javier Canosa, which touched our hearts and brought more happy memories.

Magisterial lectures

The Homecoming was also a time to update our intellectual formation. Anticipating the presence of our dear former professors with us, we arranged for them to deliver magisterial lectures. In all, four lectures were delivered. One of the older alumni, Bishop Oscar, focused on clericalism which invited many reactions from the audience, resulting in a wonderful exchange of intelligent opinions.

The second lecture complemented the points on clericalism quite well. As he has always done in the university, Fr. Luis Felipe Navarro (“Don Luis”) was able to explain “The Role of the Laity” in a thought-provoking way. He emphasized that the Church is made up of 99% laity. In his words, the laity is a *sleeping giant* that must be awakened. It has a big role to play in the evangelization

similar to what Achilla and Priscilla did in Corinth, Ephesus, and Rome. He said, "Through baptism and also through confirmation, the faithful are empowered and become capable of evangelization, of bringing Christ to the world. They do not need a mandate from their pastors."

Fr. Julio gave a magnificent lecture on "Having the Same Sentiments of Christ." To achieve it, he explained, we need to educate our emotions so that they are really centered on Christ. How do we avoid clericalism? By following Christ closely. How can the laity be effective in the Church? By doing their activities according to the teachings of Christ. We develop the sentiments of Christ in us by first educating our emotions.

The last lecture was given by Fr. Jun Bermejo focusing on three related points: encounter with Christ, evangelization, and liturgy. He

highlighted the liturgy as the place of encounter with Christ. “A celebration that does not evangelize is not authentic, just as a proclamation that does not lead to an encounter with the risen Lord in the celebration is not authentic” (*Desiderio Desideravi*). He emphasized that the love of Jesus is the reason for evangelization. He said that “The salvific power of the sacrifice of Jesus, His very word, His very gesture, glance and feeling reach us through the celebration of the sacraments.”

Fraternal, intellectual, and spiritual enrichment

The whole experience was enriching spiritually, fraternally, intellectually, and, well – why not say it – gastronomically! No wonder, several days after the Homecoming, the participants continued sending messages to the group chat.

One said: “The homecoming was a memorable and enriching experience. Thank you for the great bonding moments we shared.”

Another, still relishing his Italian days, said: *“È stata una bella esperienza stare insieme pur essendo per pochi giorni. Spero che la nostra fraternità ci serva d’aiuto per il nostro ministero. Preghiamo l’uno per l’altro. Non dimentichiamo di ricordare nella Messa i nostri fratelli defunti, quelli malati, e chi si trovino in qualsiasi grave difficoltà. Arrivederci.”* (It was a nice experience to be together despite being for a few days. I hope that our brotherhood will help us with our ministry. Let's pray for each other. Let us not forget to remember in Mass our deceased brothers, those who are sick, and those who are in any serious difficulty. Till we meet again.)

A military chaplain wrote: “I came back to my Unit Assignment spiritually uplifted bringing the spirit of camaraderie and brotherhood.”

And a parish priest in the northern part of the country said: “It was not merely a gathering but a legitimate need for my spiritual and priestly enrichment. The homecoming was both strengthening and inspiring, fostering a deep sense of camaraderie among the attendees. The shared experiences and mutual support from fellow alumni were a source of great reassurance for my ongoing ministry.”

Fr. Dennis J. Yu and Dr. Robert Z. Cortes

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