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Holy Week in Rome: The Church is Young!

I had the opportunity of a lifetime to spend Holy Week in Rome as a delegate to the annual UNIV International Student Congress.

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Holy week is a time of prayer and contemplation for the millions of Catholics around the world. It is the perfect season to go on pilgrimage and last year (2018) I had the

opportunity of a lifetime to spend it in Rome. I was one of 29 delegates from the Philippines who attended the annual UNIV International Student Congress.

UNIV was organized in 1968, encouraged by St. Josemaria Escriva who wanted young people to come close to the heart of the Church and to grow in their affection for the Holy Father. As he wrote in *The Way*, no. 250: "***Catholic, apostolic, Roman! I want you to be very Roman, ever anxious to make your 'pilgrimage' to Rome videre Petrum—to see Peter.***"

And so our first stop in Rome was St Peter's Basilica to recite the Apostle's Creed where the prince of the Apostles is buried. Our group had memorable encounters "*videre Petrum*", but allow me to share my big first impression about UNIV in Rome. It is this: the Church is young!

And the Church is universal –
Catholic!

The feeling of "family"

It was great meeting university students from different countries. Our hotel was packed with delegates from Mexico, Argentina, and Guatemala. We immediately struck it well with them and exchanged stories about our countries, our trip to Rome, and Opus Dei. I made new friends with fellows from Brazil, Spain, Russia, Poland and South Africa, among others. I would say that the common thread that tied all of us in UNIV together was our love for Christ and the Church.

Angelo, part of the Philippine group, put it this way: "One word to describe my experience with these people is 'family'. We bumped into delegates from the other countries not only in the University Forum proper but also in our visits to

historical and cultural sites, churches and museums. I didn't know them personally but every time I interacted with these fellows there was this immediate bond of friendship and unity. I think that it is because of our common denominator, which is our desire to become better Christians.”

The Prelate on Vocational Discernment

I first met the Work when I was 13 through PAREF-Westbridge in Iloilo City, where I studied high school. I participated in the activities of formation and have been doing so since then. Through the years, Opus Dei has helped me to grow closer to Christ, to be a good Christian for others, and to sanctify my work in the middle of the world as a son of God. In that context, you have no idea how eager I was to have a get-

together with the Prelate of Opus Dei in Cavabianca.

My biggest take-away from that audience with Msgr. Fernando Ocariz was his reply to one fellow who asked about how to discern one's vocation and life mission. 2018 was the year of the Synod on "Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment". I could not recall his exact words, but the message I got from the Prelate was this: *"Ask light from God in prayer... and bear in mind that ordinarily, or even frequently, God does not show us with total clarity the path that he wants us to take. That is because He does not want that we feel coerced, seeing everything so clearly. He wants that we launch ourselves freely... Don't forget that in the end the decision is yours, with complete freedom."* That struck me. The fact that God values our freedom made me realize how

much love He has for me and for everyone!

Videre Petrum

Meeting the Pope, the Vicar of Christ on earth, is for many a once-in-a-lifetime affair. Well, I was blessed to be with Pope Francis not only once, not twice, not thrice, but four times! On Palm Sunday, his message to us young people was that we should not remain silent about our faith but instead confidently shout out that we love Christ.

The second meeting was during the general audience on Holy Wednesday. He told us that we were about to commence the Paschal Triduum and that Easter was the most important feast, when we celebrate our salvation. After his address, Pope Francis began to move through the crowd. The air went electric. He was coming towards the UNIV delegates. He spoke with an

African, with their foreheads nearly touching. He placed his palm on the forehead of a Mexican. He went arm in arm with a Cantonese.

He approached J.A., one of our co-delegates. J.A. sent him greetings from the Philippines and gave him a box of *ChocNut*, as a way to cheer up the Pope and interact with him.

“Some peanut milk chocolates, a product of the Philippines,” J.A. said.

And the Pope replied: “Very good!”

“It all happened so fast,” said J.A.

“After this, all I can say is that I will NEVER forget to pray for the Pope.”

The third time we were with the Holy Father was on Good Friday at the Colosseum, where we joined him doing the Way of the Cross.

Now, the best encounter of all was during the Easter Vigil in St. Peter's Basilica. I was so thankful that God gave me an opportunity to attend the "mother of all vigils" in the Seat of

the Catholic faith, celebrated by the Vicar of Christ. It was dark inside the Basilica when the ceremony began. The cardinals slowly came in, with the Pope trailing. When all were inside, they started passing the flame from the Paschal candle. Christians of every ethnicity, race, and age were passing the light to each other. I had goosebumps! Goosebumps again when the Gloria was sung and all the lights of the Basilica came on. I felt that half the crowd stopped mid-song unable to contain their 'ooohs' and 'aaahs'!

I end this with my reflection on the Pope's homily that night. He told us that Jesus triumphs over evil, fears, and the despair that we experience in our everyday lives. This message led me to petition our Lord for sustained hope. In whatever circumstance we may find ourselves, God has a plan for us. He waits for us and tells us: "Do not be afraid. Follow

me," in everyday life in the middle of the world.

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