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Our First Year in Singapore

In the month of the 40th anniversary of Opus Dei in Singapore, Joel Martinez shares with us snippets of what the very first year was like.

10/31/2022

The three of us, Richard Roque, Joel Martinez and Fr. Peter Cenzone, arrived in Singapore at the old train station on Keppel Road from Kuala Lumpur shortly after 2 p.m. on 27 October 1982. It was a Wednesday. We had been in the Malaysian capital

for a few days after leaving Manila. We immediately headed for home at Faber Drive. Since July that year, we had been making short three-day visits to Singapore each month to find a house, obtain the required items for living in the city, and gathering useful information. In August we had succeeded in renting a house at Faber estate and the following month we furnished it with bed linen and essentials. The house had been empty and devoid of furniture except for a fridge and washing machine. The rest of 27 October was spent cleaning and deciding which room would be used for the celebration of Mass.

After a few months, we were able to move to Faber Drive 26.

The next day we bought food items, supplies and whatever was needed for the celebration of the Mass. Early in the afternoon we obtained the last

item: a Formica top collapsible table. The Mass was celebrated at 3:30 p.m. that day. A wooden carving of our Lady and a crucifix presided over the table. It was the feast of Ss. Simon and Jude, two of the Apostles. After Mass, I recalled that St. Jude was the patron saint of lost causes and I wondered if perhaps we needed him to start our new life in our new city. The following Saturday, Claro Nieva, Gerry Faigal and Fr. Cesar Santos arrived from Manila, bringing our full complement to six: four laymen and two priests. We were the original team to start Opus Dei in Singapore. The decision to start Opus Dei in Singapore had been made the previous year on the request of Singapore's Archbishop Gregory Yong. Life in our new surroundings had started and we took each day as it came following our agreed-upon routine: prayer and Mass in the morning, cleaning, job searching during most of the day; another

period of prayer and the rosary in the late afternoon; dinner together in the evening and after a brief recap of day's adventures we turned to our night prayers. Each day had its surprises and events and at the same time our list of new friends kept pace with the days. In the morning, we boiled eggs well before breakfast and ate standing because we had no chairs or table. For our conversations after dinner the staircase served as our living room. I mused, in those days, that we had the luxuries of life (the fridge, washing machine) but not its necessities (beds, chairs, tables, etc). In that environment, life took its course day after day and fortunately none of us got sick for quite a long time. We could see God's hand in our new setting.

November came and on one of the days in the month, Claro celebrated his birthday. It was the first of many birthdays to be celebrated in our

home. It was also a good moment to be together and share in life's goodness as a family. Late that month we received the news that Pope John Paul II had granted Opus Dei a new status in the Church: it was now a Personal Prelature. This juridical configuration had been the object of the founder's prayer for 40 years and it was now a reality! Along with this piece of very good news we also received a letter from Rome written by the Prelate, Alvaro del Portillo. It was addressed to the vicar of Opus Dei in Manila, but the Prelate had personally written a note in the margins directed to the six of us and assuring us of the prayers of everyone in Opus Dei as well as his, and he reminded us that Singapore was a great *crossroads* (this was the word he used) where people from all parts of the world crossed paths and that we should spread the word of God to them all. Decades later, I realised how true this was. In

December we celebrated two birthdays: Fr Peter's and Richard's. Once again, we spent the evening together and had the detail of sharing the celebrant's favourite dish during dinner. We also had our first Christmas together. Around the week of Christmas, we received dozens of Christmas cards from centres of Opus Dei all over the world sending us their Christmas greetings and prayers for the coming year. A highlight of Christmas day was the arrival of Santa Claus who gave each of us a gift. This tradition continues to this day. For our Christmas crib, Gerry used a box with small figurines and a little Baby Jesus on a manger flanked by Mary and Joseph for the centrepiece. We spend many moments praying before that crib sharing our first steps in our new country with the Child. But we felt accompanied by the entire family of Opus Dei spread out over the five continents, and united with the Holy

Family in Bethlehem. Some days after Christmas we extended our greetings to Archbishop Yong.

January 1983 was a wet month. But one day the phone rang. A family was leaving Singapore and they asked if we might want some of their furniture. Thus, we acquired mattresses to sleep on as well as a living-room set. We also came across chairs for our rooms and we could now have our meals at a simple table. We had gotten so used to sleeping on the floor that, in the first weeks after acquiring beds, some of us would roll off the bed during our sleep. Progress in our living arrangements was evident in the house.

Early in February we received exciting news: Michael Chan would be joining us soon. Michael had finished his studies in the UK just then and was spending a few weeks

in Manila before coming over. He had completed his secondary school studies in Singapore and could be considered a local, while all of us were currently in Singapore as tourists. A few years later, Michael would leave us for Rome and would return, after some years of studies and ordination, as a priest. And so that month we grew from six to seven. At this point in time all of us were still without jobs. Chinese New Year took place in February that year and it was a cultural shock for us: for the city state to come to a complete stop for most of the day took us all by surprise for which we were unprepared. Fortunately, we had a few supplies at home to tide us through it.

March was a special month. On the feast of St Joseph, 19 March 1983, one of our friends, Francis Choo, decided to join Opus Dei as a supernumerary, recognising his call from God which

had begun a few years before when he met Opus Dei in the UK. This brought special joy to us and fresh impetus in our work. On special feast days such as St Joseph's we adopted the detail of celebrating with cigarettes for the smokers and chocolates for the others. At the end of month we celebrated my birthday.

April started with good news again. One of us, Richard, had been offered a job. This was good news indeed and it also meant we had income that we could count on. Until this time we were relying solely on funds we had brought over from Manila. For some time we had been following a daily routine along with a weekend routine. The latter included Saturday lunch at home for everyone and an afternoon of work to do repairs, gardening, or cleaning. We invited some friends over to help us with these chores. Invariably, late in the

afternoon, we would spend some time in prayer.

May is Mary's month and members of Opus Dei make a pilgrimage to one of her shrines or a church dedicated to her as a pious custom to recall her maternal role in the life of Church, in Opus Dei and with each one. We used this to introduce the custom to our friends and acquaintances and in this way also became more familiar with the churches in the country.

Around the middle of May, Gerry celebrated his 23rd birthday. Being the youngest in the house the celebration was punctuated with extra noise and humour, recalling Gerry's days as a cheerleader in college. June began with Michael celebrating his birthday and receiving a job offer, which he accepted. On this month also, we celebrated for the first time in Singapore, a Mass commemorating the founder's death, who had gone to

heaven on 26 June 1975. It was held at the cathedral and celebrated by one of our priests, the other one was at the confessional much of the time. The number of attendants was small, noticeably less than a hundred. But it would be the first in a continuous chain of Masses around this day of the year, broken only by the pandemic in 2020 and 2021. It was always joyous and consoling to be together at Mass with the founder, who was always called Father in his lifetime, and was now somehow present although unseen.

Boris was a good friend of ours. In this photo, Claro appears with him.

July was a quiet month. But one day we received a call from Boris Theseira, whom we did not know then. He said over the phone that he wanted to join Opus Dei. He came to the house a few days later and we told him that we valued his

friendship and explained to him the spirit of Opus Dei, but we also emphasised that for him to join Opus Dei a discernment process was necessary and would require time. Boris never joined Opus Dei but he cooperated actively with us until his death 11 years later. His involvement with us was providential because he opened many doors, doors that we had not known about and that we could not have opened without his assistance. Only God knows why He took Boris to Himself in 1994. By that time, we had our own centre and a thriving work developing, thanks in part to his help. Boris' help had left a trail of good which included employment opportunities, the acquisition of a piece of property for our definitive house, and new friends who shared our aspirations and volunteered many valuable services to bring them forward.

Months earlier we realised that our year's lease of the house would end in August. We also knew that we had been paying a rent that was higher than the average for that estate, thanks to our naivete and inexperience. We had been looking for a new and cheaper place and had found one identical to our house, on the same estate but on another street and which was on lease at half our current rent. Thus it was that in August 1983 we moved to this new place, with great joy and much fresh hope. By this time, we had a number of friends who assisted us in the moving. We set up a more self-contained house better suited to our needs and purposes. We also celebrated Fr Cesar's birthday this month.

We celebrated National Day on 9 August 1983 as well. At that time, we had not realised the full significance of that day. However, it did not take

us long to make National Day our own, as well as enjoy the holiday. September lent us an opportunity to start a new phase in our outreach, thanks to Boris and his friends, who were many. Until this time, we had relied mostly on our acquaintances to whom we introduced the spirit of Opus Dei. But with this fresh audience due largely to Boris, we suddenly realised that a new vein of society was coming within the range of the message of Opus Dei, which was why we had come to Singapore in the first place. We completed our first year in October. On 2 October we celebrated Opus Dei's 55th anniversary, a day of thanksgiving and renewal for us. The house was now amply furnished, for we had beds and furniture to live as a normal family, and we felt very much part of the country. By this time, we also had all the required ornaments, vessels, liturgical material, and other items needed to

celebrate Mass with dignity and in full conformity with the rubrics. The prayers of everyone in the Work all over the world had accompanied us every day and we continued to be united in that communion of saints. We would cease to be the youngest, for soon Opus Dei would be taking her first steps in Sweden and Taiwan. On the feast of St. Jude, I reflected that he had interceded for us that we would find our bearings quickly and assimilate the local culture as another sign of the universality of our faith. He had really helped us.

I was still a tourist at this time and every two weeks I had to leave the country for a few days, usually by going to Kuala Lumpur where we were following up with contacts and friends. In fact, Francis had found a job there. 40 years have now passed. It seems a short time because God has been good to us. I wonder if He

wants us to start soon in other places! In fact, that is exactly what a crossroad makes possible.

Bl. Alvaro del Portillo sent us a very affectionate letter, with words that opened for us a wide apostolic panorama.

Translation of letter (the translation of the handwritten words have been bolded and italicised):

To my dear children of Singapore, Joel and the others, who are beginning to do the Work at the crossroads of the East: I send you a photocopy of this letter, with a warm embrace and my most affectionate blessing.

Rome, 24th November 1982

Dearest Pepe: May Jesus watch over you!

I have just received the first letter from my children in Singapore, after

they have settled permanently in that country, and I am writing you these lines with a soul full of joy and gratitude to God, who never ceases to bless and encourage our apostolic work.

I am reminded of those sweet and promising words that Christ addressed to the Apostles, which our Father made us meditate on so many times, and which I now remind these sons: *duc in altum!*

They have before them a most beautiful task of souls, a divine adventure, which requires on their part a great love of God and much self-denial in order to sow the seed of the Gospel doctrine. I ask our Father to bless them with a most abundant blessing, so that they may feel constantly urged to carry out a deep and extensive work, bringing to every corner the light and warmth of

faith, and that they may be filled with hope: they are waiting for them!

Tell them to be assiduous in their dealings with the Blessed Virgin. From her hand they will know how to find the Lord behind the smallest incidents of ordinary life, and the normal difficulties they meet along the way, when they wish to serve God, will disappear.

Remind them to observe the Norms of piety very well, with love, and to take great care of their fraternity: in this way their life will please the Lord very much and, with his grace, they will know how to *turn the prose of their daily life into heroic verse*.

Along with these words that I wanted to send them, they can rely on all my affection and my prayer so that they may strive to become holy, *contemplatives in the midst of the world*. I am also sure that you will

not cease to pray for me and for my intentions.

He embraces you and blesses you
*with the blessing of our dearest
Founder,*

your Father,

Álvaro

Joel Martinez

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