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The Prelate in Cebu (Philippines) 2023

Msgr. Fernando Ocariz was in Cebu on August 3-5, in the final part of his 12-day apostolic trip to the Philippines. From there he flew to Indonesia, and will continue on to Australia and New Zealand.

08/07/2023

AUGUST 3, Thursday

Msgr. Fernando Ocariz, the Prelate of Opus Dei, landed at the Mactan Cebu International Airport shortly before

noon. “Bienvenido!” and “Welcome to Cebu, Padre” read the tarpaulin signs carried by the well-wishers. Some Cebu families with their children met him as he entered the private reception area. A boy dressed as Datu Humabon and a little girl dressed as Queen Juana gave him gifts. Humabon and Juana were the first converts to Christianity in 1521.

A good number from the various cities in the Visayas and Mindanao came to the airport to welcome the Prelate. The last time the Prelate came to Cebu was in 1998. They practically filled the reception area and all wanted to personally greet him. At the background, young women from Iloilo sang Spanish songs familiar to the Father, providing a jovial family atmosphere.

The Father was visibly pleased with the reception. He engaged one well-

wisher after another with a constant smile. He listened to their little messages, thanked them for their gifts, and obliged every request for a photo, signature, and blessing. Those warm and familiar 20 minutes set the tone for the Father's stay in Cebu.

Lahug

At his residence in Lahug, the Father met with more families. They shared their family stories and some gave him personally crafted gifts. Some children had their small messages for him and gave him drawings and sketches. He blessed the children on their foreheads. He gladly acceded to their requests to sign their mementos and take photos with him.

The Father received guests in his residence after lunch and dinner. They came from Iloilo, Bacolod, Cagayan de Oro, and Davao, sharing with him stories about the apostolic activities where they lived.

PAREF Springdale

In the mid-afternoon, Msgr. Ocariz visited PAREF Springdale school. He was welcomed by members of the Board of Trustees for PAREF schools in Cebu, PAREF Springdale management staff, teachers, and their families. Springdale is a private grade school and high school for boys.

He was shown the school quadrangle, which is presided by bronze relief sculpture of the Holy Family designed by renowned Cebu artist, Celso Pepito. The Director of the school pointed out that the child Jesus in the relief is dressed as the Santo Niño of Cebu. Two boys entertained him with a violin number and a song.

Diocesan Priests

The Father proceeded to the meeting hall in Springdale where about 25

priests were eagerly awaiting him. Among them was Bishop Isabelo Abarquez of Calbayog (Samar), who brought 5 of his priests. Present were clergy from Cebu, Butuan, and Leyte.

The Prelate spoke to them about the dignity of the priestly ministry, telling them that priests are Christs on earth. He touched on the importance of diocesan priests living a deep fraternity among themselves, and providing support to priests who at times may feel lonely in their ministry.

Responding to a member of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross who asked “how to be good sons of St. Josemaria,” his advice was to be very natural and not to be afraid to ask our Founder for things. And then to strive to be faithful to the spirit he has left us.

At the end of the get together, he asked for their blessing.

Santo Niño of Cebu

The *Santo Niño* (Holy Child) holds a special place in the hearts of Filipinos, particularly those from Cebu.

The Prelate of Opus Dei visited the *Basilica Minore* of the *Santo Niño* of Cebu in the late afternoon. He was welcomed by the *Hermano and Hermana Mayor*. Also there to welcome the Father were families in their *Sinulog* attire and well-wishers from Davao, Cagayan de Oro, and West Visayas. The Father went out of his way to meet them before entering the Basilica.

While traversing the wide esplanade, some ladies asked him to bless an image of Sto. Niño to be placed in their Center in Davao. A group of ladies from Bacolod asked the Father to bless a seedling to be planted in their new Center. A young couple asked him to bless the mitten and

booties of their first child to be born in December.

The Augustinians are the custodians of the basilica. Father Ion escorted the Prelate to the second floor of the Augustinian Convent to pray before the original statue of the *Santo Niño*, the one gifted to Juana by Ferdinand Magellan in 1521. He laid flowers at the base of the image.

AUGUST 4, Friday

Banilad Center and BCPD

First thing in the morning, the Prelate celebrated Mass in the oratory of the Banilad Study Center. There he met patrons of the Dayao center for women in Davao City who showed him the design of the definitive center in Davao, which the Father blessed. When he asked 'Can I go there? Will you invite me there?' there was a millisecond of shocked

silence, followed by a thunderous
“Yes, Father!”

He walked to the adjacent Banilad Center for Professional Development (BCPD), a technical-vocational school that has played a pivotal role in promoting women empowerment and providing livelihood skills to vulnerable sectors of society like the Indigenous Peoples, the out-of-school youths, and persons with disabilities.

The BCPD students welcomed the Prelate with a popular Cebuano song “I Love Cebu” the lyrics of which were changed into “We love Padre”. He was beaming with joy as he listened and watched them dance. After the performance, the students approached him for the traditional “Mano Po” greeting (forehead on the hand of one’s parent).

Members of the Management Staff alternately explained to him the various social programs of the

school, a number of which are supported by international agencies. The Prelate met and blessed some Badjao women who finished Bread and Pastry Production in BCPD. He asked them to pray for him, which they all agreed to do.

They showed him the printed architect's perspective of the BCPD dream school in Minglanilla, Cebu. He wrote on it: "With my blessings" and signed his name.

The school gave him a toque with a logo of BCPD and declared him as the "Master Chef of BCPD." They also gifted him with a small backpack, an invitation for him to come to Cebu for another visit.

The Prelate encouraged them to continue their work in the school so that more women, families, and communities benefit from their various social programs. Before he left, the Prelate posed for the final

photo with the BCPD Patrons, Board members, faculty members, staff, and mentors.

General get together

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 welcome 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. As everyone settled in their places, 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 the centers in Mindanao are present in this get-together.” This comment elicited enthusiastic applause.

Holy Eucharist, Prayer, and the Pope

The Father started with a few words, encouraging them to be people of the Eucharist and of prayer. He spoke of how God's presence in the Eucharist - he made reference to the tabernacle

in the Oakridge chapel - and his presence in souls who are in the state of grace, can give us the strength to do many things. He urged those present to live their Christian life with a lot of hope and joy, knowing that God loves them and watches over them. "We live in heaven and on earth at the same time, with our feet well-grounded in the things of ordinary life, but with our heads in heaven," he said.

"God always listens to our prayers and answers them," he assured us, "even if at times it seems that He is not responding to our pleas." Our prayers are always effective, he said, as Jesus said in that Gospel passage: "Ask and you shall receive."

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.

Two Fernando's

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: "Cebu now welcomes the Father, another Fernando, who comes to strengthen and motivate us to share the faith in and beyond Cebu." 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, the first Filipino converts to the faith: the *Sto Niño*,

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

Conversions and fidelity

Marianne, 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.

Marianne shared that she and a group of students would teach catechism to children in a tenement housing area close to the school. 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 in Cebu, brought to our consideration once more how deep the Catholic faith has taken root in the Philippines. It was moving to witness today the love that the people of the Visayas and Mindanao have for the Christ Child, a heartfelt devotion that has passed through the generations, from 500 years past.

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