

## **Modern-Day Missionaries to the World**

*Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) take and practice their faith fervently wherever they go or are. That is why the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines appreciates the role of OFWs as modern-day apostles of evangelization in the foreign countries where they work.*

Mary Jane Soriano, a 25-year-old college graduate Filipino domestic worker, has been working in Hong Kong for some years. During her stay there, she always made it a point to attend the Sunday Mass in a local church, even if her employer and his family belonged to another religion. Besides Mary's humility, simplicity, hard work, honesty and other human qualities that inevitably impressed her employer is her indomitable Catholic faith and the way she practices it - simple ways to keep her life and faith going: always trusting in God, praying daily, being good and doing good to others.

In due time, the employer and family voluntarily embraced the Catholic faith with their own volition and interest. One reason for this was Mary who practiced her faith in a simple and sublime manner; being a domestic worker inspired them in a non-subtle and non-assuming manner. Mary is one of the millions of OFWs who are spread all over the world.

An OFW is a person of Filipino origin who lives and works outside of the Philippines. The term denotes Filipinos who are abroad indefinitely either as citizens, permanent or temporary residents of a different country and those Filipino citizens who are abroad for a limited, definite period, such as on a work contract or as students.

About 80 percent of the Philippines' 107 million people are Catholic and, unlike many other countries where the faith has waned, the majority still practice their religion with enthusiasm. And OFWs take and practice their faith fervently wherever they go.

About 10 percent of the population of the country are OFWs located in more than 193 countries. Half of them are in the U. S. where more than 85,000 Filipinos continue to migrate every year. That is why the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines deem OFWs as today's apostles of evangelization in the foreign countries where they go to work or migrate.

For Manila Archbishop Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle, OFWs play a big role in sharing and proclaiming the "joy of the Gospel" given their sheer number. "Our overseas Filipino migrant workers have become the big missionary presence," says Tagle.



Government data shows that over 10 million Filipinos are living and working overseas in varied professions like medical doctors, nurses, engineers, teachers, caregivers, domestic helpers and others.

In Brunei, there are about 20,000 Catholics and 70 percent are Filipinos. Bishop Paul Hinder

of the Apostolic Vicariate of Southern Arabia has appealed to Filipino bishops to send more Filipinos based in the Middle East to join the vicariate. About 90 percent of Hinder's apostolic vicariate is Filipino. Without the Filipino workers in the Middle East, Bishop Hinder would not have a diocese.

## Time to share Faith

OFWs bring their faith to wherever they go. It is this faith that many OFWs and their families turn to prayers for guidance and strength to lessen the impact of separation caused by migration. Spain brought Christianity to the Philippines centuries ago and eventually, it has paved the way to make it Asia's largest Catholic country.

Now, with the West facing emptier pews, it's time for the "heirs" to become missionaries themselves and bring the faith back to Europe and other parts of the world; it is time for Asia to come back to Europe and America in order to "give back the faith."

OFWs are seen as heirs who have received the gift of faith as an inheritance which cannot be used only for oneself but to be shared with others. OFWs share it even with those who have given them the legacy. They have received faith and now it is time to share.

With millions of Filipino migrants all over the world, Archbishop Gilbert Arnea Garcera of Lipa, former chairman of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) Episcopal Commission on Family and Life, said they have become missionaries, living their faith and setting examples to their host communities and countries. Besides

being the most trustworthy employees, Filipinos abroad actively participate in church activities as they practice their faith deeply, religiously and vigorously.

Filipinos actively take part in church-related activities. They fill empty churches, fill the air with joyous songs praising God. They are

the answer to the prayer of parish priests who have only a few old people left in a parish. They are active in the parish. Many fallen-away Catholics return to the faith of their fathers, led by a child catechized by a Filipina caretaker. A Filipina, taking care of children left alone by parents and keeping up with young kids, shares the essentials of the Faith. The OFWs, who stayed away from churches at home, become fervent Catholics and even become apostles. In Christianizing others, they Christianize themselves.

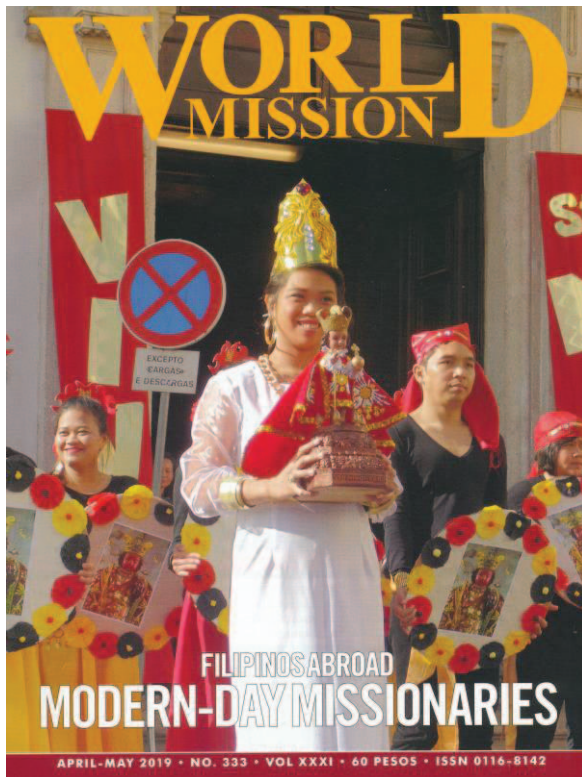
Their efforts are efficacious, even without training in catechesis. God more than makes up for their shortcomings. God cannot be kept from being with those He loves. He always finds or makes the way. The hand of God is not shortened.

Filipino overseas maids or domestic helpers in Beirut, Lebanon, while walking the dogs of their masters, discovered a shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes. They made it a frequent place to visit.

The late Jaime Cardinal Sin, Archbishop of Manila, was able to send many priests to Rome for their annual retreat without spending a penny since the money came from someone who had returned to the church because their children were practicing the faith. They had been catechized by a Filipina maid.

## Continued Devotions

In Philadelphia (U.S.A.), the OFWs set up novenas on Wednesday. Not to Our Lady of Perpetual Help but to some other saint. This shows that they were able to adapt. They carried their practices in the same way that the early Jesuits brought their image of the House of Nazareth to South America through the Atlantic Ocean. In the diocese of



Sacramento, California, they got permission from the bishop to celebrate the *simbang gabi* (predawn Christmas novena Masses celebrated from Dec 16 to 24).

At the peril of losing their lives, Filipino men, women, and others in Muslim countries gather for the celebration of Mass and in sharing communion with those unable to go to the improvised chapels. Without a missioning ceremony, the OFWs are Christianizing a dechristianized Europe and Muslim countries. Just as the early church was spread not only by missionaries but also by slaves, the same task is being achieved by lowly domestics.

These Filipinos who leave their families behind do so not because of incompatibility or misunderstanding but “out of love.” Filipino husbands and wives live separate lives because they love their families which literally means leaving their families behind for overseas employment.

Archbishop Gilbert Garcera of Lipa in Batangas says, however, while the economy benefits from foreign remittances sent back to Manila, the Philippine government should do its best to introduce and create humane and decent jobs to keep Filipino families intact.

Garcera recalls Popes Paul VI and John Paul II during their visits to Manila over ten years apart when they called on Filipinos to be “missionaries to the world.” “That is what’s exactly happening now,” he says. However, bishops say that OFWs as missionaries is “something that we did not plan.”

There have been a lot of efforts to awaken this missionary calling in the Filipino church. In the past 50 years, the church has formed groups like the Filipino Mission Society which is now present in different parts of Asia. It also has the Lay Mission Association. It has lay missionaries also being sent to different parts of the world.

There are also many Filipino priests, as well as other religious men and women, working in different parts of the world.

## **Sacrifices**

The CBCP Episcopal Commission on Migrants says the Church recognizes the sacrifices and services of those working in foreign countries for their loved ones and country. Foreign employers recognize their honesty and deep faith in God. Italian parents, for example, admit their children are safe under the care and hands of Filipinos. The Church is thankful to the OFWs for showing the true face of Filipinos who are God-fearing, hardworking and very patient. They are new missionaries of faith to the world. The Church is praying for them to be safe in their workplaces, to keep away from troubles and harm and to find caring and humane employers. Bishops have urged the government to ease the hardships of OFWs from dehumanizing conditions, unjust labor practices, and other abuses they face in parts of the world.

Filipino workers abroad are a big help to the economy remitting about US\$2.55 billion annually. The remittances are hard-earned money from their blood, sweat and tears and products of their sacrifices and sufferings.

## **Contribution to the Church’s Mission**

Filipino bishops regard overseas workers as “missionaries of the Catholic faith” and appreciate their help in the Church’s mission to spread the Gospel. Former CBCP president Archbishop Angel Lagdameo of Jaro says, “the notion of Filipino diaspora has been redefined” after they were given a clearer picture of the “new situation” of OFWs.

Coming from a predominantly Catholic country, these migrant Filipino workers in search of livelihood are equipped with the disposition and skills of lay missionaries, who will not necessarily preach but live the Gospel of Jesus in the context of cultural and religious pluralism.

They are Filipinos in dialogue with other cultures and religions, which for them is a new way of being active in Church and participating in the mission, beyond adding to the number of churchgoers in the



receiving Churches which have fallen victim to materialism and secularism.

The CBCP has called on the government to focus on programs that would raise job opportunities in the country to prevent the flight of Filipino workers, who “have become part of our social concern.”

“How many of them are made to suffer because they are deprived of employment rights, their salaries or travel documents unjustly withheld? How many of them, mostly women, are abused, assaulted or sexually harassed by employers? How many of them suffer the pain of isolation, alienation, and discrimination? And need we talk about the innumerable cases of broken families and

conjugal infidelities?” asked outgoing Archbishop Emeritus Angel Lagdameo of Jaro as he enumerated the concerns of the Church with the migration of Filipinos.

### Positive Aspect

Lagdameo said it is about time to look at the “positive aspect” of the global migration of Filipinos. “Along with our smiling faces, we are offering our Christian faith to the receiving countries or Churches, lived in the context of different cultures and religions. This positive aspect is likewise the new challenge of the Filipino diaspora. It is both a challenge and a concern,” Lagdameo said.

“Two million Filipinos have already made the Middle East their home. Would you believe that 30 percent of the entire population of Malaysia, which is 900,000, are Filipinos?” Lagdameo asked.

“Of the 140,000 in Hong Kong, he said, a majority are Filipino domestic helpers. In

Italy, only one half of the more than one million Filipinos are listed; the same is said of the one million in Japan,” he added.

“These few examples are only a portion of the migrant Filipinos we find present from America to Asia, from Africa to Oceania, from Russia to Australia and also from Jordan to Saipan,” Lagdameo said.

### Social Costs

Amaryllis Torres, a professor at the College of Social Work and Community Development of the University of the Philippine and social scientist, says there are many flip sides to Filipino migrant workers. Due to the OFWs phenomenon, there are

many “social costs”– children grow up without their parents’ physical presence and guidance; instead they are taken care of by grandparents or other relatives, posing many challenges for children.

Another aspect is when one of the parents is away, there are

reports of illicit relations.

“How to balance the economic factor with social cost is the big challenge for the country and church,” Torres said. According to observers, about 5,000 Filipinos leave the country daily in search of employment overseas. “It is a dream that there would be a day when no Filipino would ever leave the country in search of a job abroad for the sake of the family,” she said.

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