

Interview with José Pascual Burgués



Born in 1953, in a town called Torrecilla de Alcañiz, Spain. At the age of twenty two, while he was doing military service, he discovered his religious vocation and he joined the Piarists whom he already knew both as a student and through one of his uncles, who was a member of the Order. Currently, he is Vice-Provincial of the Vice-province of Japan and the Philippines. Before, he was General Delegate in Spain. “And from Madrid, they sent me to Japan- Philippines. The demarcation was founded in 1995 and I was sent in 1997”. He lives in Cebu, Philippines. He has worked for a long time in several formative tasks: Master of novices, Master of postulants and Director of the Calasanz Cultural Centre. Now he focuses on the coordination of the entire vice-province, as Major Superior. In this meeting, he talked proudly of the increasing number of vocations in the demarcation and of the four religious who have become the first Piarist Philippine priests.

What was your first impression on arrival?

It was so different in many ways! But so familiar in the religious aspects, because the Philippines has fed itself with the religiosity that the religious from Spain brought with them all these centuries ago, and so in terms of religion, I felt quite identified with the Spain I knew about 40 years ago. The language has been the most difficult thing, but I am getting used to it. I get by in English because I still don't speak any of the various native languages.

What are today's challenges?

We need to expand and we are working on that, because it's about time we have other ordinary pastoral foundations. Another challenge is to work with children that still don't know how to speak English, because this is

really difficult, and although I'd like to speak some of the other native languages, it's not at all easy.

Regarding the Vocations, what is the state of the demarcation?

We're doing well and working hard. We've dedicated a lot of time and people to the work of the pastoral on vocations. We've taken it very seriously, and thanks be to God, its fruits can be seen.

Having or not having vocations surely does not just depend on moving around?

It depends on a lot of factors. Here, we find ourselves in a privileged situation, kind of "fat cows" that could end soon. But because now it's a favourable situation, we have the responsibility to take the best advantage of it as we can.

Do you think that there are cultural aspects that have a bearing on the increase in the number of vocations?

Well, the fact that 80 percent of the population are Catholic, surely has an influence, taking into account moreover that the Philippines is one of the countries with the largest number of Catholics in the world. Being a developing country motivates many young people to have other aspirations through the Church, something that we are aware of and take into account in our work. The Catholic Church has a great influence both on a social and political level and that is very motivating.

Is it possible that a young man could reach out to the vocation due to an inquisitive desire to ascend the social scale and after that he becomes a "truly" vocational religious member?

It's difficult to get inside other peoples' heads, but I imagine that when a young man comes to us it's because of several motivating factors working at the same time. There are many reasons and then one reason becomes stronger than the others and it is the decisive factor in whether the youngster continues or leaves. I believe that the great majority are well intentioned. We, in the Philippines, only accept candidates that have already graduated

from College. This is very important, because youngsters who want to study don't come to us, only those that have already studied. They might want to improve their social situation and that's what we work with. Nowadays to have a College degree, is very important in the Philippines.

What does "very Catholic" mean?

Practicing, and, above all, committed. People who, if they can - because there are many places that don't have churches- go to Church. Many churches on Sundays are full.

Let's talk about Japan; that's a whole different story, isn't it?

Yes, that's a completely different story, because Japan is a country of mission, and this is felt everywhere. The Japanese Church is in a very different situation compared to other Asiatic countries. There are countries where Catholicism, being a minority, is extending and growing strongly, like in South Korea or Vietnam; but in Japan, it's not like that. In a population of 125 million, there are only 500 thousand Catholics, and this amount is not growing. The majority of Catholics in Japan are immigrants; Hispanics, or from the Philippines. On the other hand, Japan is living a crisis of the modern age. It is an ageing society with a low native birth rate; factors that mean that there are few Japanese Catholics that are inclined to follow a religious vocation. More than half of the priests in Japan are foreigners. We are really hopeful about keeping up our works that were set up half a century ago, and at the moment, we are strengthening the Piarist team with Philippines, with the hope that some Japanese will be able to join us some day.

How does one work for the vocations?

It means that someone specific must have taken on the responsibility of dedicating himself to it, to have some specific activities to share with the Order, without diminishing the interest that we all might have. Now, a young Philippine is in charge, who is dedicated to this in Japan. In the Philippines, there are several people who are dedicated to the vocations; including some lay people, our co-operators.

As Major Superior, what are your main concerns in all this wide and varied area?

Consolidation and expansion. We are opening houses and forming youngsters, but there is a constant concern about whether this can be firmly established. That is to say, we have so many youngsters and the challenge is to help them to understand and love the Piarist charism. On the other hand, I feel continuously worried about my own getting used to and understanding of such different cultures like the Philippine and the Japanese. The expansion is in some way due to the message sent out by John Paul II, when he said that the Philippines must be the missionaries of Asia. The Philippines have taken it very seriously, since they are aware of the fact that there are so many people in Asia who don't know the message of Christianity.

In the history of your career? What attracted you to the Piarists?

It wasn't education because, being a teacher, I was already completely dedicated to this. I don't know, I think that it was the desire to be completely dedicated and to accomplish God's will, I was keen to have a more holy life. It's hard for me to define; it's hard for me to think back so many years ago. I felt that I'd been called on and I was very happy to have that opportunity. I 'd known the Piarists as long as I could remember, so to speak, and I felt proud about being called to be one of them.

Do you try to transmit this keenness for holiness that you felt to the youngsters that you are forming?

That is very difficult to transmit; each one should have it. I suppose a young person approaches us because he has some of this inside of him. Our job is to discern if this really is a calling from God or if it's another interest.

Is the theme of testimony important too?

Well, thinking about my own vocational process, I can tell you that some Piarists gave me a good testimony and others didn't. I suppose today it's just about the same; in some ways our lives can be exemplary models and in others aspects, they are not. I am not even saying that it isn't important, but I think that there is something more important than testimony. I think that

the testimony of the institution is more significant than the one of a particular person. Many of the youngsters who approach us do it because the proposal of dedicating their lives to serve poor children draws their attention. I mean, they're moved by the ethical and religious goal of the institution.

What motivates you at this moment in your life?

What motivates me the most is the desire of expansion of the Order to improve the service to the Kingdom of God, but also to revitalize the Order that has a lot to learn from the Orient. The fact that we are opening up new paths in India, Philippines and Japan, I think can be very enriching for the whole Order. Perhaps not immediately, but in the future, and it's really worthwhile for all of us to support this type of initiative.

The expansion forms part of our objectives as an Order, and it's a way to see the "restructuring" that we so much speak about. Currently, we have Indonesian (6), Vietnamese (2) seminarians, and we are waiting for the arrival of some Chinese and Burmese, in a near future.

What do you mean when you say that there is a lot to learn from the Orient?

The Orient has another rhythm, another way of understanding life, and other values, more humane, closer to nature. All of this in such an accelerated world can greatly enrich it as well as helping to keep the balance. In the long term, I think the Orient will win the war, although now it seems to be losing the battle.

(By Julio César Boffano)