

## Some snapshots of ecumenism in the Philippines

# Unity is realized by doing it

**Heike Vesper**

*This year the Philippines celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their being evangelized. The first 800 inhabitants of the archipelago were baptized on 31 March 1521. Today around 80% of Christians belong to the Roman Catholic Church. Different agencies from ten denominations collaborate together through the National Council of Churches to give a witness and a common service. There are numerous initiatives and occasions to grow relationships and to pray together. One example is the Quezon City Ecumenical Fellowship: from a meeting among friends a community and network has come about which has spread throughout the whole country.*

When the Catholic Church in the Philippines declared 2020 as the year of dialogue (ecumenical, interreligious and with indigenous peoples), the Bishops' Conference entrusted the coordination of the various activities in the Archipelago to the Bishops' Commission for Ecumenical Affairs. In the secretariat, two lay people, Jane Roble and Robert Samson, were chosen to coordinate the networking of the four commissions and to collaborate closely with Archbishop Lampon, who chairs the Commission for Ecumenical Affairs.

"Immersed in this reality," they say, "we committed ourselves first of all to living mutual love among ourselves and with the presiding archbishop. Each day had its own challenge. By making every effort to listen to each other, to offer each other our own ideas with detachment, by simply living for each other, we experienced the presence of Jesus among us and opportunities presented themselves one after another. The work with and for the Church in Lippina required collaboration with bishops and theologians on a national level: an opportunity to share our lives as "people of dialogue" and our passion for the Church.

As a gratifying result for those who have worked behind the scenes, very concrete programs have been organized at the national level on dialogue and ecology, and last February a webinar was held for bishops on the document of the Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity *The Bishop and Christian Unity: An Ecumenical Vademecum*.

### **A network of fraternity**

The meaningful relationships that have been created have also increased collaboration with many local ecumenical groups such as the *Quezon City Ecumenical Fellowship (QCEF)*, to name one. It includes Christians from different communities, animated by the conviction that it is not enough to just to meet for evangelization or charitable activities. It is possible to realize wonderful projects and bring together different groups of Christians, but if there is no mutual love, nothing is of value.

In fact, when the QCEF was launched many years ago, no one intended to create an ecumenical association. It was simply a meeting of friends from different churches over a cup of coffee. Today we share joys and sorrows, we are committed to cherish each other and love each other's Church. There is no lack of ideas and initiatives to make us meet more frequently. In this regard, the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity has become a great opportunity to walk, work and pray together.

### **The challenge of the pandemic**

Even the pandemic did not stop the regular meetings. Meetings to discuss the Word of Life and share experiences continued online. Together we work on sponsorship programs, organize webinars with various experts to help those who are going through difficult times and video conferences on various issues to be addressed in these times such as dealing with psychological stress in times of crisis, anxiety and depression, preventing domestic violence and child abuse. Through a communion of goods, moreover, it is possible to offer emergency financial assistance and essential supplies to those affected by recent typhoons and floods.

A source of further encouragement is a chat group using Messenger through which people regularly share their experiences of dialogue. Like that of a family living next to a Methodist church. The relationship between neighbors began during the construction of the church, offering the possibility to connect to the water supply and building a dividing wall between the two properties to ensure their privacy. A relationship of true friendship has been established even with the ministers who have served the Methodist community over the years,. Recently, the current pastor has participated in fraternity meetings with the QCEF and, when he suffered the loss of his wife, all the members of the group were close to him in various ways.

What can we say in conclusion? Jane and Robert said: "For all those who are involved in social activities, liturgies, moments of prayer and ecumenical meetings, Christian unity is not a dream but a reality".