

Spiritual exercises in communion

When charisms meet...

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The Xaverian International Theologate School of Manila (Philippines) tried a new way of conducting their annual spiritual exercises in the light of communion among charisms. They chose the permanent Mariapolis of the Focolare Movement in Tagaytay, Cittadella Pace, for their retreat. Xaverian Father Matteo Rebecchi, Giuseppina Signorini, and Mario Suerte (two focolarini) speak about the experience.

“Spiritual exercises” are traditionally understood as times reserved for meditation and contemplation, lived in silence and personal prayer. But what if silence could be paired with speaking and solitude with companionship? It is not a question of "replacing", but rather of uniting and giving space to both realities. Spiritual exercises lived in this way – with reciprocal charity – are profoundly valuable because they allow for a welcoming of the freely shared experience of God as it is lived in the life of another brother or sister.

For this reason, the Xaverian Theologate School of Manila (Philippines) “tested” holding their 2022 spiritual exercises at the Focolare Movement’s permanent mariapolis in Tagaytay, the *Cittadella Pace*. The Xaverians are a religious community established toward the end of the 1800s, whose missionary charism *ad gentes* is that of their founder, St. Guido Maria Conforti: "Go into the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to every creature" (*Mark 16:15*). Inspired by Saint Francis Xavier, they aim to keep the local Church aware, committed and connected to the missionary mandate of the universal Church by bearing principal witness to Jesus to those who do not yet know him.

Cittadella Pace, like other permanent “Little Cities” of the Focolare Movement, is a small village with businesses, schools, places for prayer and gatherings. It is where diverse peoples and cultures desire to live mutual love among them and thus bear witness to Christianity lived.

The "setting"

It often comes spontaneously after a conference or seminar to ask: "How many were you?" It is a habit that is hard to break around numbers! But today we are being called to instead live an experience that emphasizes not so much the quantity but the quality of relationships. In this sense we can say: "Each person counts as if they are an entire people!" And in fact, for these exercises there were ten students and formators from six different countries (Italy, China, Brazil, Indonesia, Congo and Burundi). During their time at Tagaytay they were hosted in the various men’s focolare community houses there.

According to the words of Xaverians who participated, they were first struck, and marveled at, being welcomed into a *community*, a community where they were considered not only as guests but as a *gift* in all respects and as residents of the "little city."

Another fact noted from the beginning was that almost all the focolarini present had also lived lives of missionary experience abroad. The Xaverians found in this a shared commonality between their own challenging missionary life commitment and that of the people who welcomed them in Tagaytay.

Among other surprising aspects was the "collective" nature of the week of exercises. Topic themes were often presented by teams of several people. Some of Tagaytay's focolarini were also present during meetings and at various other moments, including sharing life experiences and acting as a kind of 'leaven' through listening and concrete love. There was Giacomino, for example, who is a focolarino. Participants remained struck by his silent and attentive attitude. Retreatants often meet only with the preacher accompanying their spiritual exercises. Instead, Xaverians found themselves in front of a small "crowd" of disciples, with a singular 'preacher': *Jesus present in their midst*.

Immersed in everyday life

The program included morning meditations on various points of the spirituality of communion, and concrete aspects related to community life in the afternoon. Particular emphasis was given to topics such as material communion/poverty, prayer and the apostolate. Interreligious dialogue and the protection of minors and vulnerable persons were also theme topics as well.

There were moments for reflection, times for questions and answers, and spaces for communion after each topic presentation or theme. Then, of course, there were also lighter moments, like a joy-filled evening in which everyone offered their artistic talents that sprung from the wealth of cultural diversity so emblematic of those present for the Exercises.

Philippine culture is also well known for its hospitality. Sharing a meal is an integral part of life and an expression of *being a family*. The Xaverian retreatants were welcomed into the various focolares with this spirit. Dinners were especially appreciated because they reflected the lifestyle of the houses in which the focolarini live, as they also differ from that of many seminaries and convents. Moreover, they were opportunities to share threads of each one's respective vocation journey, of the "sacred pages" of personal encounter with the Father's love.

It was evident, too, that the retreat also brought a presence of the 'feminine', with the inclusion of reflection on the Marian profile of the Church. 'One can say that the Church is *both* "Marian" and "Apostolic-Petrine"', affirms Pope Saint John Paul II, in his apostolic letter, *On the Dignity and Vocation of Women, Mulieris Dignitatem*. This feminine presence was also in harmony with the 2016 Vatican document on priestly formation, *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, which states: "The presence of women in the Seminary journey of formation has its own formative significance. They can be found as specialists, on the teaching staff, within the apostolate, within families and in service to the community. Their presence also helps to instill a recognition of how men and women complement one another." (n. 151).

Christian life, a constant journey of discovery

Of course, some needed to overcome an initial hesitancy around an annual retreat that was not based solely on individual prayer and silence. But gradually, each one embarked along the path offered to retreatants during those days, immersed in an atmosphere of family unity. In this way, the grace of Jesus present among us could touch each person in a unique way.

Nothing can be taken for granted in our Christian life journey. One student was struck by the experiences shared and felt called to put the Word into practice, because until that moment he had considered the Gospel more as a book for study and reflection than one to be lived. Another stressed the need to deepen community life and give priority to relationships. And many grew in their understanding of the importance of loving one's neighbor. A formator noted that the recounting of life experiences put into relief those moments of light in which each person was touched by God's love for him or her, and how these moments marked the beginning of a journey of conversion and total self-giving to God and to one's brothers and sisters.

Two closing impressions speak to the value of the exercises done in this way:

A Xaverian retreatant: "The retreat was done 'together', with the spirit of St. Francis Xavier and Chiara Lubich both alive and present among us."

And a focolarina: "I experienced mutual love in these days and benefited as a person. I also felt the community benefited, and that I can say: 'This is the richness of charisms as they are expressed in 'one' service to the Church and to humanity.'"

In short, it was a beautiful experience of light. It was both a retreat and a school, because it was also an experience of learning to live in communion, shifting attention from the 'self' to the 'we', living and thinking in a Trinitarian way. From this experience, we see that a retreat done in this way could also be proposed in the future to other communities or seminaries, as a 'school' in living the Gospel and a contemplation of Jesus present among us.

When charisms meet, *Jesus' presence grows*. And there, Jesus is discovered anew.