



'To swim or not to swim — that is the question.'



After two weeks of silence, novices relax at the beach.



Community life isn't always peaceful.



A pair of brand new signs make the novitiate house a little less 'hidden and unknown.'

The community blesses the new car — a gift from our Superior General.

Slender



Nik (left) and Leo (right) partying in Digos over the break.



The Marist Sisters visit our community (we serve the best coffee).

A TIME FOR REST AND RELAXATION



In every single program, whether it is daily, weekly, or annually, you can always see that there is a time for break. It is a particular time that is set apart from the normal, routine timetable. It is a time for

relaxation and rest, but also a time to reflect and see how much you have achieved in your life. Not only that, but it is also a time to set some goals for your future. Having a break might not be important to some people, but as far as I am concerned, we as humans all need a break sometimes in order to relax and rest, especially after going through a lot of activities, classes, and lectures.

This year, 2019, our novitiate program set up a one-week break for the novices before going into the second half of the novitiate. The break was held from 12 August to 19 August, and it was enjoyed by every novice. Before it occurred, everyone was already looking forward to it, because we were a bit tired and we needed some time to rest and relax. This became apparent when I learned that each novice had already planned what he would do during this one-week break and where he would go, well in advance of the break itself. It was a great experience for all of us, even though some of us decided to spend most of the time in the campus, just to get enough rest. For those who went out daily, I do believe they really enjoyed their tour in Davao City.

All the novices spent a day visiting our foster families in Digos City, and a few of us went further to visit the Marist Missionary Sisters in General Santos City.

Our break does not mean that we took a break from everything in our program; no, it is only a break from having classes and doing things like manual labor. Every morning we had our morning prayer and Mass, as usual. Our evening prayer was done in private, and it was good to see that some of the novices returned before the normal evening prayer time, in order to do their prayer. It was a great experience because we all enjoyed it, and I would say that it helped us to regain our energy to continue the second part of the novitiate.



Lesley KINANI

BUGEY MISSION EXPERIENCE: MATTI, DIGOS CITY



Bugey is a region in the department of Ain in Eastern France, located between Lyons and Geneva. When Marists talk about the Bugey missions, they are referring to the early history of the Society of Mary, between 1825 and 1829. The early Marists began

their work here in 1825, and they were: Pierre Colin, Jean Claude Colin, and Etienne Déclas. During these years, Jean Claude Colin and his companions would go out for a mission – preaching, giving retreats, listening to confessions, and administering the sacraments – for thirty days without a break. Their task was to preach to the people who had no parish priests, and they were to do this travelling on foot through the snow and mud of the mountains. They lived and shared their daily living with poor people under very primitive conditions. Despite the hardships and challenges they experienced, Colin remarked, “Never were we so joyous. Never did we laugh with such good heart. I have always been nostalgic for that period. They were good times...” (OM 639).

For my own taste of the Bugey Mission Experience, I was sent to the Marist Fathers’ community in Digos City from October 8 through October 22, 2019. Digos is a city in Davao del Sur in the Mindanao region of the southern Philippines. The Marist Fathers have been ministering in this place since 2004. At that time, they lived a couple of kilometres away from the present site, while working as chaplains to the National High School and in prison ministry. In 2012, at the request of the bishop, they moved five kilometres outside of Digos City to the barangay of Matti, where they ministered to 24 mission stations or Basic Ecclesial Communities (BEC). These communities now comprise Our Lady of Fatima parish, erected on 13 May 2019 by Bishop Guillermo Dela Vega Afaible, the Bishop of Digos, as a new parish of the Diocese of Digos. There are three confreres working in the parish: Fr. Christopher Thadeos Ganzon, sm (District Superior and Parish Priest) from the Philippines; Fr. Patrick Muckian, sm (Community Superior, Parochial vicar and Chaplain in the Prison ministry) originally from Ireland, but present in the Philippines for over 25 years; and Fr. Arnold Garferio, sm (District Vocation Director and Marist

Laity Animator) from the Philippines.

It was a privilege for me to be part of this community for two weeks to live and share their life and mission while living my unique Bugey Mission Experience. It was indeed a joyous time, as not only did I share life with the Marist community, but also with the parishioners and other people who were very welcoming. Immediately, one can notice the strong Marist influence through the spirituality and simplicity in the parish. As mentioned above, there are 24 BECs that make up this parish, and I was pleased to have visited a couple of them and participate in their beautiful and simple liturgy. There is a large presence of young people who are dynamic and enthusiastic about the mission and work of the parish. I was fortunate, on one occasion, to give a reflection during the Youth General Assembly of roughly 230 young people from all over the parish. However, the old are not left out as everyone has a place in the life of the parish.

Also, during my stay in Digos, I witnessed almost all the work the Marist confreres are doing in Digos. They are chaplains to the two jails (PRC and BJMP) in the city. In PRC, I visited the inmates and joined them for Bible sharing; in the BJMP, I was filled with compassion as I witnessed the weddings of two inmates. They were two convicted men whose wives live outside, but joined them to regularise their matrimony in the jail. It was just so beautiful to experience such an act of love. There is also an active campus ministry where recollections, confessions, and catechism lessons are brought to students and pupils in their schools with the assistance of devoted catechists. In all, I can say, I witnessed the celebration of six of the seven sacraments of the Church, with the exception of Holy Orders.

In the end, my feelings are those of gratitude to the Marist community in Digos for accepting me and continuing to nurture in me the zeal and love for the mission and work of the Society of Mary, which they live faithfully in this part of the world through their simple lifestyles, compassion towards the poor, and sensitivity to the spiritual needs of the people.

Clinton ASUNKWAIN KUBE



BUGEY MISSION EXPERIENCE: DAVAO CITY



The first phase of the Bugey Mission Experience saw novices assigned to campus ministry, assisting in the running and administration of student recollection and retreats; or to the Southern Philippines Medical Centre (SPMC), assisting in the hospital chaplaincy office. Both assignments were located in Davao City.

Hospital chaplaincy work entailed meeting with patients and providing support for office staff: novices visited patients in the orthopedic and emergency/observation wards in the mornings, and they assisted in the Mass and other office duties in the afternoon. Entering the wards on the first day was particularly challenging – the first patient we came across was, in fact, the remains of a patient who had died in the observation ward and was moved to the corridor for collection. As we came past, our guide Fr. Boy, made as if to say something, but then thought otherwise and made the sign of the cross as he continued walking. It was the clearest and most explicit introduction to this form of ministry that we could have received, for we were to be greeted by a sensory overload of death, misery, and sorrow. Patients in the emergency/observation ward are in acute medical crises – usually the effects of stroke and renal or gastrointestinal distress – and we were invited to enter into that distress alongside them; we were invited to share not only in their suffering, loneliness, and anguish, but also in their hopes and courage. Due to the overcrowding of the hospital, patients are often in observation for extended periods of time until a bed can be found in other wards. This allowed us to meet and build connections with the patients (and in the case of children, their parents as well) over a period of days.

Meanwhile the majority of orthopedic patients were the victims of motor vehicle accidents and were left in traction following major surgeries to mend broken bones. We were once again called

to be alongside these patients in their pain and suffering; though less critical than emergency patients, their pain was much more acute and their injuries more graphic – we saw severe scarring, extreme traction devices, and caved-in skulls. We experienced the frustration of being confined to a bed, the infuriation of postponed surgeries, and the trauma of destruction. But, within that frustration, infuriation, and trauma, we also saw optimism, hospitality, and a community spirit – patients support one another through their injuries and we were accepted into that community. For many patients, we were seen as an extension of the love and support that they received from one another.

In all, hospital ministry at SPMC might be the most difficult and challenging thing I have ever done. The days were long and arduous, the emotional toil exacting, and the days made longer by negotiating public transit. Often, we found ourselves with people who spoke little English, and the language barrier was difficult to cross. Many of us were forced to confront death – and in doing so, our own mortality – and for some, it threatened even the very existence of God. Nevertheless, all of the difficulties and challenges, all of the toil and labour, were made trivial by a patient looking at you through their pain and saying, “thank you for visiting me.”

Our most sincere and expressive thanks to Fr. Boy Guinit, MI, and all of the staff and volunteers at the SPMC Chaplaincy Office for their welcoming support and love.



Hemi ROPATA



The novitiate community gets a visit from Fr Ben McKenna sm.



During the Bugey Mission Experience at Our Lady of Fatima parish in Digos City, Fr Pat Muckian sm (center-left) and Clinton Kube (center-right) are visited by Fr Leronio sm and Fr Fred Kado sm.



The novitiate community visiting the cemetery on All Souls Day



Leonard (left) and Lesley (right) pretend to be hard at work



Nothing like a soutane to make novices suddenly seem serious.



Fr Ben McKenna sm shares his stories from the missions.



ON DISCERNMENT AND THE POWER OF NARRATIVES



To be a Christian means to believe in a fundamental narrative – Salvation History – that underlies all of reality. It means believing that God once spoke to a man named Abram, calling him to set out into an unknown and foreign land; it means believing that God delivered his chosen people, Israel, from slavery in

Egypt; it means believing in the ‘new heavens and new earth’ promised by God through the prophet Isaiah. Most of all, it means believing that the salvation of the world came to fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ – that God became human in the Nativity, lived among us as a prophet and teacher, was crucified and died, yet rose again, conquering death. It means believing that God continues to live among us in the body of believers, the Church, and that God is alive within our own lives and stories.

Seen in this light, discernment can be understood as hearing, *within our own stories*, the unfolding of Salvation History. For a novice, this discernment culminates with the decision of whether or not to apply for vows. I would like to share a bit more about listening for the voice of God in my own journey towards applying for temporary vows in the Society of Mary.

Becoming Still

During the novitiate, a novice decides to dedicate one full year to discerning the will of God in his life. That time is a grace and luxury that few are able to experience, yet it can be surprisingly difficult to take advantage of that time, because it is a challenge to remain still and really listen to the sacred story in our hearts. Here at our novitiate, cultural differences, living in a foreign country, and even sometimes the community and the novitiate program can all pose obstacles to becoming still enough to hear the voice of God. It is easy to want to ‘jump the gun’ on a decision, to look towards the future, or to pour oneself so deeply into the daily tasks one must do that one loses sight of the stillness required to hear the voice of God. Real discernment, however, only takes place when we are genuinely still, living in the present, waiting on the voice of God with attentive hearts. The poet T.S. Eliot describes this ‘dance’ in his *Four Quartets*:

*Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is ...
Where past and future are gathered.*

Neither movement from nor towards.

*Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.*

I am only able to live that dance of discernment when I learn to live with uncertainty. Will I profess initial vows, or will I keep them beyond the initial term of commitment? I must admit that these are questions that I simply cannot know right now, and I must learn to accept this dif-

ficult reality if I am to make a good discernment.

Though difficult, becoming still enough to listen to the voice of God is not a mystery beyond reach. For me, I find that I am able to do it when I allow my mind to rest. Breath awareness, centering prayer, and *Lectio Divina* become daily tools for my daily entrance into that “still point” where there is “only the dance” of God. From this place, and aware of the presence of God, I can begin reflecting on my own history from the perspectives of spirituality, human relationships, dreams, and aspirations. I ask God for the grace of seeing my history through his perspective, and I use Scripture to become aware of how God has been present to his people in the past – for that past may hold the key for recognizing his presence in the now.

Building a Vision Through Our Stories

As I begin to recognize the different ways that God has been present to me in my past, I am able to enter into dialogue with God about what decisions will best allow me to love him as I move forward. Seeing the love of God at work in my past sheds light on the specific way God calls me to love in the present and the future. It remains, as always, a personal call from God.

An example of discernment done in this way can be found in *Deep River*, a novel by the Japanese writer, Shusaku Endo. In the novel, Otsu is a Japanese Catholic priest who has always found himself at odds with his religious order and the wider Church because of his own theological perspective, grounded in his Asian identity. After many struggles with the Church, Otsu eventually discovers his vocation: spending his life living among the poorest of the poor in India, carrying “untouchables” to the Ganges river where they can be ceremonially cremated in the Hindu tradition. By the end of the novel, Otsu has discerned how God calls him to live the tension in his life: he remains a Catholic priest, but rather than serving in any traditional ministry, he hears a call to be present to Hindu untouchables, while living in a community of Hindu pilgrims. He discerns his vocation by reconciling his own past and putting into practice a way of loving God that is uniquely his own.

A Free Choice

Like Otsu, I, as a novice, seek something similar: to understand the tensions within my own life and put them into practice in a way that glorifies God. Discernment culminates with a free choice – God is not asking us to make a “right” or “wrong” choice, but is rather calling us to respond to his love out of freedom and creativity. God gives each of us the freedom – and responsibility – of accepting his “gracious choice” and discovering the way in which we might bear God within our own stories in the service of the Gospel.

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NOVICES