

A LETTER OF THE SUPERIOR GENERAL TO THE PROVINCE OF THE PHILIPPINES ON THE OCCASION OF THE FIRST FRATERNAL VISIT

January 26 - February 6, 2015

Fr. Leocir Pessini, the Superior General, and Fr. Aris Miranda, a Consultor, arrived in Manila on January 26, 2015. The first week was spent in visiting communities and ministries of religious in the North. The fraternal visit was conducted in the form of inter-community sharing. Members of communities from the South joined us in Metro Manila. The focus of the sharing was a reflection on the recent visit of Pope Francis – its impact on the individual lives of religious and the current situation of the Province and its life and ministry. The second week was dedicated to a 5-day general assembly of religious of the Province of the Philippines. Twenty-six religious attended the assembly with 3 temporary professed religious as observers, as well as members of the secretariat.

The Province of the Philippines is made up of the Delegation of Taiwan and the communities of the Philippines, Australia and Indonesia. The Philippines has 8 communities with 29 religious who are assigned inside the country and 8 abroad (Indonesia, Australia and Italy). The average age of religious is 37. It also has 11 temporary professed religious and 5 novices, excluding the 7 who come from Indonesia (4), Kenya (2) and Uganda (1). In the field of ministry, the Province has 3 hospitals, 2 polyclinics, 1 nursing home, 7 hospital chaplaincies, 2 parishes, 1 pastoral center, 1 NGO for health, development and responses to disasters, and 3 formation houses. The Province is also involved in the HIV/AIDS care ministry and the Pastoral Care in Health Commission of the Bishops' Conference at the national level.

During this fraternal visit, Fr. Aris and I were able to visit most of the communities, except those in the South, as planned. Although I was not able to visit all the communities, I had a chance to meet, talk and listen to all of you in groups. I was glad to meet some of our lay collaborators from the different ministries as well. This visit was providential because it came a week after the visit of Pope Francis. It was a time to be together, sharing experiences, reflections and aspirations after such a wonderful visit of the Pope. I was informed that almost all of you had a chance to see the Pope in person. That is why I during my visit the very first question that I deliberately asked each one of you was about Pope Francis' visit. Our sharing then turned out to be an integration process as regards the papal encounter and the pooling together of your dreams for the Province.

I was delighted to hear from you your feelings of great admiration, joy and enthusiasm as regards Pope Francis' visit. I could see the same feelings that Pope Francis generated when he greeted the Camillians on July 14, 2014 at St. Peter's Square. You took that encounter as a challenge to renew your commitment to consecrated life and enrich your mission of bearing witness to the gospel of mercy and Samaritan compassion. The simplicity of his dream, his gestures of humility and his courage to be with the lowly awakened your spirits as they rested in your comfort zones. Many of you expressed the desire to go to the outskirts (geographical outskirts and outskirts of the heart).

You were reminded of this by his homily at the Manila cathedral when he appealed to you with these words: “The poor are at the center of the gospel, at the heart of the world. If we take away the poor from the gospel, we will not be able to understand the whole message of Christ” (*unscripted version*). You want this appeal to be implemented in our ministry, especially in our hospitals, by giving access to poor patients to the best healthcare. At this point, I challenge you to change our image of the patient as a person lying down on the bed at 180 degrees with a person standing up at 90 degrees. There is also a challenge to go beyond the perimeters of our institutions and examine what causes this person to fall sick. What is happening to the environment he lives in? This is a call to look at the concerns of ecology and other causes of illnesses. This is a new way of being a Camillian.

You talked openly about, and called my attention to, some of the disturbing realities, the shadows, of the Province, which generate fears and produce frustrations. Some of these are worth mentioning so that we will be reminded of our moral responsibility and obligations as Camillians to face them with rigor and determination in order to find solutions, firstly as a way out, before indulging in alternatives as temporary relief. I do not rank them according to their gravity or priority.

First, there is the difficulty of religious who are assigned as administrators of the health institutions. This difficulty derives from the absence of the following factors, namely, 1] the professional training and experience of young administrators; 2] funds that are available for the extraordinary expenses of hospital maintenance; 3] a collaborative system of management and a working board of trustees; and 4] multi-tasked religious in the community. Some of them feel alone in managing these issues and concerns. One expressed this sentiment in these words: “We are much more focused on ministry than the ministers”. Because of this, administrators limit themselves to maintaining what there is and never dare to take risks in improving the services. Second, the dwindling number of candidates in initial formation and the increasing number of religious leaving the Order. To date you have 32 seminarians in the pre-novitiate, 5 novices, and 11 scholastics. Since 1986, 20 perpetually professed religious have left the Order. “There are remarkable challenges in the family, social, political, cultural, moral and spiritual dimensions of life. These affect the dispositions and maturity of our candidates” (*Lineamenta of the General Assembly, 2015*). While it is true that the scarcity and crisis of vocations to religious life is a global phenomenon, no one should remain indifferent to this phenomenon because here lies the future of the Order and its mission in the Church. Third, the Province is not yet financially self-sustaining and the subsidy from Taiwan for the formation houses is gradually decreasing. Though the contributions from the local communities are increasing, they cannot as yet suffice for the daily needs of the Province.

Nonetheless, we must not be worried or pessimistic about these challenges. You have studied, evaluated and analyzed the situation in a systematic way. The *Lineamenta* and the five-day general assembly attest to your sincerity to confront these issues together. The assembly was somehow an experience of walking along the path of the five stages of the conversion of St. Camillus. First, it was an experience of the wish of everyone for personal conversion. There was an openness to discussing pertinent (personal and communitarian) issues that affect the present condition of the Province. This was brought about by your experience of the humbling presence and gestures of Pope Francis during his recent visit to your country. Second, the affirmation of the gospel as the

primary rule of our life as consecrated men and as people called to mission became the rallying point in the discussions in order to identify root causes and propose sound solutions. Third, the realization that we need to transform and to revolutionize our services to the sick – “from Camillus to the Camillians” – was an impetus to your readiness to challenge yourselves: the way you are today (spirituality), the way you grow (formation), the way you work (ministry), the way you belong (community), and the way you subsist (finance) cf. *Lineamenta*. This needs personal guidance by your elders or superiors and the need to seek help from experts or professionals in the field. Fourth, this transformation will only be possible if a religious has inner conviction as regards what he believes and dreams, being freed from the corruption of selfish motives and gains and acting only for the sake of the poor sick person. Lastly, in order to make this belief in the gospel of mercy and compassion a tangible reality, he needs a competent heart, the compassion of the Samaritan. Taking into account fast-changing realities and the new signs of the times, you need to prepare yourself professionally and be equipped with tools that will make our services to the poor sick acceptable, sensible and marked by good and lasting results.

The assembly outlined the path to the solutions to the problems presented. The approved resolutions are clear and measurable. The good thing is that you recognized the problems, crafted the solutions together and adopted them by your affirmative votes. However, the process is not yet over. The assembly was not simply a demonstration of your problem-solving abilities or a show of unity in the Province. The assembly bears the “sacred” (sincere and truthful) duty to establish a new direction for the Province. The last Provincial Chapter (2013) had already mapped the direction of the Province and it is absolutely binding. What was decided at the assembly were further specifications or prescriptions of the approved resolutions of the above-mentioned Chapter. I then urged you to follow the following suggestions. 1] After the final draft is published, the Provincial Council has to design an implementation plan with clear timelines. 2] Further planning must be done with ample participation of the religious, especially those who are members of the various secretariats of the Province. 3] With regard to resolutions that require in-depth study and immediate action, such as the alignment of pre-novitiate formation in the context of the dwindling number of candidates and the new curriculum introduced by the government; the setting up of a commission to look into the problem of religious leaving the Order; and the setting up of a working boards of trustees in the management of healthcare institutions, swiftness of action based on priorities is required. 4] Vigilance and prudence must be exercised as regards the collaboration of lay people in the administration of the goods of the Province.

While all these initiatives revolve around the duty of the Provincial Council to lead, the broad participation of the religious and lay collaborators is opportune. The youthfulness of the Province is a great resource and strength but it could be a source of fragility and a liability if not protected and taken care of. Open communication and transparency should be cultivated in relation to one another. Correct information is vital in achieving progress and development. In this way, the smooth implementation of plans will be facilitated. Moreover, I encouraged everyone to think not only provincially but globally. Your concerns and gains, your sorrows and joys, and your failures and achievements, are united with the Order. You should not feel alone on this path. Other Provinces and Delegations are also following you and willing to lend their hands when needed.

I would like to express my gratitude for your fraternal hospitality in all the communities that I visited. Keep your hearts open to other cultures! The novitiate is an interesting example of the internationalization of our formation process in the Camillian community in Asia. Create unity in diversity and in the presence of different cultural values: this is always a challenge. Go forward with open hearts! A final characteristics that make you unique is your youth! In this period of our lives, we need *much affirmation* and *always confirmation*. What is truthful as regards life also applies to the Province. The role of those that exercise leadership in the Province is important at the level of vigilance and in always reassuring confreres in this spirit of our Camillian identity as Camillian religious. Let us take the opportunity of the Year of Consecrated life (2015) to grow in this direction and to revitalize our inner selves, as well as our relationships in our communities.

In the name of the General Consulta, I wish you all the best in this triennium. Be assured of our support and prayers for all of you in the Province! May Jesus the Good Samaritan always be the inspiration for your entire ministry and may Saint Camillus, our founding father, be your protection in everything that do, think, dream and pray!

Rome,
February 28, 2015

Fr. Leocir Pessini
General Superior