



## **IN THESE PANDEMIC TIMES...**

### **THERE IS STILL TIME FOR REJOICING...**

For the Sisters of St. Paul de Chartres, there are many reasons for rejoicing: "325 years of presence, mission, and service in the world; their 110 Years of religious formation in the Philippine Province; and their legacy of God's unconditional love, constant call, and shepherding guidance emanating from the colorful tapestry of the 500 Years of Christianity in the Philippines likewise celebrated this year..." In addition, the Sisters commemorate the 311<sup>th</sup> Death Anniversary of their holy founder, Fr. Louis Chauvet.

On 21 June 2021, the Sisters celebrated the 110 years of religious formation in the Philippines with a Mass, officiated by Bishop Broderick S. Pabillo, D.D. as the main celebrant. On this occasion, Sr. Lilia Therese Tolentino, SPC, Provincial Superior, gave a comprehensive talk on the history of the congregation's religious formation in the Philippines:

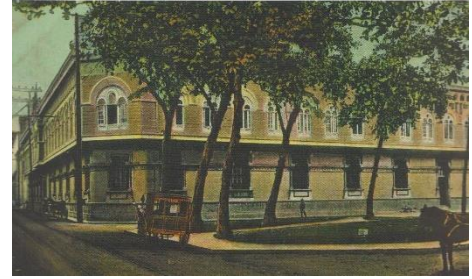
*We who are physically gathered here this morning for the celebration of 110 years of SPC religious formation and the Sisters who can participate with us only virtually because of the pandemic are privileged to be part of this historic milestone in our Congregation in the Philippines. This festivity of formation for more than a century is about us, Sisters of St. Paul, and our call to continue discerning our relevance as consecrated religious in our Filipino context today and in the context of the highly globalized world we live in.*

*We are holding this Thanksgiving Mass here in St. Paul University Manila in the vicinity of Malate, because of its historical significance as the site of the first official novitiate of our Congregation in the Philippines, erected in 1911, a short seven years from the arrival of our seven pioneer Sisters in Dumaguete on October 29, 1904.*

*During their first seven years, our first Sisters accepted ladies who expressed their desire to be Sisters of St. Paul. It is good to know that our pioneer Sisters met their first applicant during their brief stopover in Cebu on their way to their final destination, Dumaguete, the first SPC Philippine foundation. The young lady, by the name of Maria Echaves, whom they met at the Convent of the Immaculate Conception in Cebu, where the Sisters rested, expressed her desire to join the Sisters so they brought her along with them to Dumaguete. One of the Sisters was assigned to teach and guide young Maria, who became a postulant after a year. We can perhaps rightly say that the Sisters' acceptance of Maria Echaves marks the informal start of SPC religious formation in the Philippines, right on the day of the Sisters' arrival in Dumaguete.*

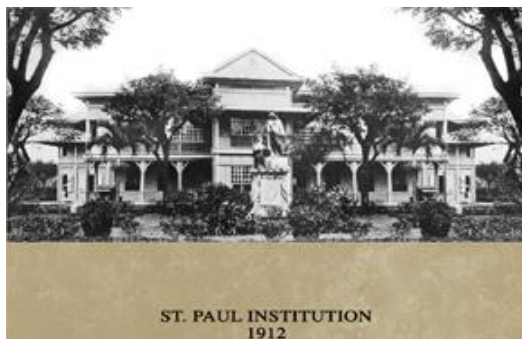
*There were three other young ladies who joined the Sisters in Dumaguete. Unfortunately, one of them, Petra Lasala, became fatally ill. The Superiors in Chartres granted the permission that she be clothed in the Holy Habit and to pronounce her vows in articulo mortis, meaning, "at the point of death." Thus, Petra Lasala, whose religious name was Sister Henri Marie, became the first Filipino to make profession of vows as a Sister of St. Paul. She completed her mission on earth two hours after she pronounced her vows. She became the first fertile grain that bore numerous fruits of religious vocation for the Congregation in the years that followed.*

*In 1910, the need to bring the postulants together in a formation house became obvious. A wooden house near the church of San Juan del Monte was rented to bring the postulants of Dumaguete and Intramuros together. They lived in poverty. The Sisters in St. Paul's Hospital in Intramuros (picture right) provided their meals. But because San Juan del Monte was quite a distance from Intramuros and the means of transportation then was the calesa, it was not possible for them to have regular schedule of meals. To solve the problem, the Sisters looked for another house close to Intramuros. They found a small one in Singalong, which became the second rented novitiate house.*



*It took the Superior, Mother Theresa Verdier, one year to find an appropriate site for the SPC Novitiate. In 1911, she found what she wanted—a lot in Malate. The chosen place was a swampy marketplace, which Mother Theresa had to convert into solid earth. The construction of a one-level house of half concrete was completed and blessed on June 25, 1911. The Clothing Ceremony for the first five Postulants was held on the same day.*

*The years that followed saw the growth of the Congregation with numerous vocations pouring in. Through the years, the formation program kept on evolving and adapting, especially in terms of focus, process, and duration of the different formation levels. In the early years, the prescribed period for the Aspirancy was three months and two years for the Postulancy. The first two years of the Novitiate were spent in the local communities for the experience of participation in the life and mission of the Congregation. After two full years, the Novices were called back to the Novitiate for their Canonical Year of three years. It was only after five years of preparation that the Novice made her temporary profession of vows. It was not compulsory then to make final profession of vows.*



*The growth of St. Paul Institution, the school in Malate, and of the second Novitiate, which had been transferred to New Manila in 1935 made it necessary to find another place for the formation of Sisters. A quiet, woody hilltop in Antipolo was found. The Novitiate took its final journey from New Manila to Antipolo in 1963. Our Lady of Chartres Convent thus became the permanent seat of the initial formation of the Sisters of St. Paul in the Philippine Province.*



We fast forward to our time now. Today, we also celebrate the 311<sup>th</sup> Death Anniversary of our holy founder, Fr. Louis Chauvet. This is the day our Superior General chose to hold the congregational tree planting project, dubbed "325 Trees for 325 Years," to commemorate the 325 years of mission and service of the Sisters of St. Paul of Chartres in the world. As the text of the commemorative plaque says, the tree "parallels the spiritual journey of our congregation from the tiny seed of Levesville, germinating in the heart of Fr. Louis Chauvet, our founder, to a tree widespread and far-flung to various continents—teaching, healing, and touching lives. A symbol of grace, growth, and hope, this tree affirms God's power to create, redeem, and sustain all of Creation."



Today is also Entrance Day of Aspirants. I do not know if it is proper to say it is ironical that on the very day we are celebrating 110 years of our religious formation, we only have one aspirant who will enter today. Deep in our heart, we are still hoping and praying that more will join on other entrance dates within this historic year. Many would console us that even if the number of aspirants joining us has progressively dwindled through the years, at least, there are still ladies attracted to our way of life. So far, we have not yet experienced a "zero" vocation. St. Paul University Manila, the site of the first SPC Novitiate, is proud and happy that the aspirant who will enter this afternoon is a graduate of this university. I, too, am a graduate of this university, then St. Paul College of Manila. In various capacities, I spent roughly 32 years of my life in this school, which I have considered my second home. I was an eyewitness of the vibrant presence of numerous Sisters missioned in this school, as many as 70 at one time, distributed in at least three dormitories in the campus, their resounding beautiful and animated voices filling the walls of this same chapel, and their appealing visibility in the campus and classrooms impacting on the lives of the students, teachers, and staff. In my installation speech as President of this university in 2010, I expressed my wish that St. Paul Manila be again a seedbed of religious vocation. Intermittently, vocations would come and that certainly pleased us and made us happy. And today, before all my Sisters, I reiterate the same wish, that all our institutions and communities be fertile seedbeds of religious vocation. We know at heart that this can happen only by the grace of God and by our personal and communal witness of fraternal charity through which others experience God in us.

The phenomenon of dwindling membership of religious congregations and institutes of Consecrated Life has become a serious concern. And I must admit that this is our concern. The lack of new vocations has led to the aging of our congregation. The median age of our 406 temporary and perpetually professed Sisters in the Philippine Province is 72. I pray hard that I will not yield to the temptation to see things in terms of numbers, efficiency, and accomplishments. Pope Francis said that the consecrated life will not flourish because of brilliant vocation promotion programs, but because the young people we meet find us attractive, because they see us as women who are joyful! The apostolic effectiveness of consecrated life depends on the eloquence of our lives, lives which radiate the joy and beauty of following Christ and living the Gospel. Today is a good occasion to ask ourselves again: Is Jesus really our first love and only love, as we pledged He would be on our Profession Day? It is only from Jesus we will learn the meaning and practice of love. Let us be reminded of what Pope Francis said: "I urge you



*not to 'join the ranks of the prophets of doom who proclaim the end or meaninglessness of the consecrated life in the Church in our day; rather, clothe yourselves in Jesus Christ and put on the armor of light—as St. Paul urged—keeping awake and watchful.' Let us, therefore, constantly set out anew with trust in the Lord."*

*This is a milestone year in our history. It is a year of jubilee! Let us, therefore, take this opportunity to publicly and humbly ask pardon from our merciful God, from one another, and from the many people who cross our path. We ask for the remission of our failure in charity and fraternal witnessing because of our refusal to welcome one another in our differences and for not making enough effort to make our communities more life-giving, forgiving, and compassionate. We ask forgiveness for not living the mission Who is Christ and not putting Him at the center of our lives, thus failing to radiate the joy of our encounter with Him. We are also contrite for not spending quality time with one another, with the poor, and with those we serve and work with; for not listening with compassion and understanding; for not accompanying, encouraging, and offering our comforting presence. We are sorry for our infidelities and indiscretions that scandalize others; for falling short in our prayers and for failing to contemplate our Lord God and radiate Him to our fellow Sisters and to the world.*

*In the same breath that we ask for forgiveness for our many failures, we likewise give profound thanks to our Lord God for the gift of religious vocation, for calling us by name and asking us to follow Him, for choosing us to be His partners in mission to proclaim the nearness of God and His salvific love for men. We thank the Lord for our beloved religious congregation, the Sisters of St. Paul of Chartres, which He has sustained and embraced all through its 325 years in faithful love, and for inspiring us to be more generous, more forgiving, more compassionate, more understanding, more inclusive, and more faithful.*

*Mysticism and prophecy are two essential, closely connected dimensions of our religious identity, both as Christians and consecrated religious. This year of celebration, therefore, is the most auspicious time for us to renew our commitment to the mystical and prophetic dimensions of our lives. Mother Goretti Lee, our Superior General, wrote: "Prayer is the heart of our life of consecration... Likewise, our personal and communal witness flow from the quality of our prayer. We are challenged to reclaim and deepen this contemplative dimension of our life, otherwise, we run the risk of becoming simply social workers or administrators, but not religious Sisters. We are called, first of all, to proclaim with our life, more than with words and works the fruits of our encounter with God, and to be Christ for all. ...Let us therefore take up the challenge and commit ourselves to PRAY, WITNESS, and PROCLAIM our Risen Lord within our communities and in our fields of mission by the eloquent language of our transfigured lives" (CA 2019, 6-7).*

*I conclude with the following words of Pope Francis in his Apostolic Letter to all Consecrated People on the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life: "You have not only a glorious history to remember and to recount, but also a great history still to be accomplished! Look to the future where the Spirit is sending you in order to do even greater things" (110).*

