

TEAM MISSION 17
PHILIPPINES MISSION REFLECTIONS
January 3rd - 16th, 2017



In January, a group of fifteen motivated individuals from St James, left for the Philippines to embark on a Mission Immersion experience, that would change their lives.



Mission 17 Team and mmsp Priests

(L-R: Marianne Arriero, Rhea D'Souza, Phuong-Thanh Nguyen, Anthony Muscatello, Taryn Darlow, Rhys Williams, Geralyn McCarthy, Simon Beraldo, Asalemo Tofete, Fr Hector Attard, Fr Ivan Burdian, Thomas Sia, Fr Jude Pirotta, Christopher Swanney, Diane Sia, Mia Are, Trong-An Nguyen)

The team embraced the experience in the Philippines under the guidance and support of the mssp priests and brothers in Manila and Bataan. They saw first hand the challenges faced by the communities but had an opportunity to serve and interact with the poor and marginalised of these communities, being a witness to the gospel values.

Below are the reflections of the team's experience:

DIANA SIA: During the trip, I saw students travelling for hours everyday to and from school in order to provide themselves with a better future and families living under one roof that appears as if it could collapse at any minute. Yet despite this hardship, there is still happiness in the hearts of the people. There is such a strong sense of community and

camaraderie present in their lives. They look out for one another and despite having little; they give all that they have. Seeing the work of the MSSP priests and Brothers in Manila and the work of Fr. Joe in Bataan was also very uplifting. Their work provides the families in the Philippines with opportunities to break the poverty cycle and they work tirelessly to serve others and to bring happiness to whomever they can.

The Mission 17 trip opened my eyes to the constant struggle to survive for those living in impoverished conditions. However, I learnt that it is during these struggles that God is most prominent. I learnt that God is present especially in the most bleak of situations – that He is able to bring people together for a common cause. There is hope where we search for it and God is always present in hope.

SIMON BERALDO: Accepting the call to participate in Mission 17 was not an easy decision. Leading up to the trip, I did not know what to expect nor could I label the feelings that I harboured. Having experienced mission trips in the past, I was not sure how participating in St James' mission immersion experience would affect me. It was not until close to the end of the mission immersion that I began to experience a transformation within. No one experience or encounter led to this change, but the culmination of all the sights and sounds in the Philippines has caused me to reflect on the interactions and friendships I have with others. In the end, it was not what I could give to those I met but what I received that was truly empowering.

To witness the strong sense of community in Manila and at the Jose De Piro Formation Centre in Bataan was truly a wonderful experience. Interacting with many different people and listening to their personal stories allowed us to witness the presence and spirit of God working amongst the people in the Philippines. Participating and leading after-school activities for the children in Bataan, including dance lessons, sports clinics and rosary bead making, allowed us to form connections with these children which was definitely a highlight of the trip. And to witness the tireless work of Fr Joe in Bataan and all of the fathers and brothers in Manila inspires others to reflect and ask the

question, "What else can we do to support those in need in our own community?"



The team donating stationery and books to the children in Batchiwan

CHRISTOPHER SWANNEY: To me personally, the trip to the Philippines was like therapy. It was the perfect way to kick start my 2017. The experience itself has definitely solidified my relationship with The Lord. Witnessing good deeds and also being part of it, are one of many stories that I will gladly share with others. Witnessing happiness in the poor community was something that I took to the heart. Appreciating the smallest things in life is one of the many things that I learned from the many people we met. The beautiful people of the Philippines have taught me the true meaning of happiness. Meeting and helping the community was definitely the highlight for all of us in M17.

One of my favourite highlights was watching the team grow stronger. Every day we would come out of our shells more and more. As a team our faith has grown stronger, bringing us all closer to God. It was good to turn to the person next to you and comfortably talk about God. Before the trip we didn't know much about each other. We left Melbourne Airport as friends. 2 weeks later, we boarded our flight back no longer as friends. We came back as the M17 family. SOLID.

TARYN DARLOW: 'Inspiring,' would be how I would describe my Mission Immersion. Having previously dealt with the feelings of guilt, anger and sadness from my experience of Mission 15, I was able to go in with a different perspective, a positive perspective. On this mission, I saw the light amongst the darkness. I saw the face of God, this time not in the vulnerable and broken, but in the leaders, volunteers and my fellow Mission 17 team members. I was inspired by

the work of the mssp priests (Fr Joe, Fr Hector, Fr Mark and Fr Martin), the seminarians, and local leaders (University Leaders and student volunteers, Mayor Gila, Sister Celina, Youth Leader Rome Jake Fajardo, and School Principals), who dedicate their lives to being a voice for the voiceless and who work tirelessly to provide opportunities for people to change their lives. I was inspired by my fellow Mission Team Members, who embraced the experience and, despite being challenged, gave the local community members, in the words of Fr Joe, feelings of "hope, love, a sense of worth, and a feeling of companionship."

I realised, that despite the negatives in this world, there is still so much goodness. So many people in this world are willing to give their time, talents and financial support to help those who are not as blessed as we are. Those are the faces that I will remember and be inspired by, to not only continue with the work I do, but to take it to the next level to have a positive impact on the lives of many others.



Mission 17 with local leaders: Sr Celina, Sr Gemma, Sr Mehnaz, Mayor Maria Angela Garcia, Council Members, Fr Joe and Rome-Jake Fajardo

RHEA D'SOUZA: It is hard to put words on paper to describe my experience. I didn't know what was going to happen on this trip and that had scared me. Yet God showed me a different way of life in the Philippines. The efforts of the MSSP community in both Manila and Bataan were really inspiring. Just to see the dedication and devotion put in by all the Brothers, the priests and the Missionaries of Charity every single day for the community was a lesson in

selflessness and generosity. At times, during the trip I got to observe from a distance. Observations from a distance are easy to make, I realised. However, to actually get closer in each situation, to interact, and to understand the difficulties in people's lives first hand makes one feel absolutely helpless.

Getting back home, my preconceived notions on how the trip would pan out for me had been shattered. The one thing I can definitely say I received from this trip is a renewed and deeper faith in God. Knowing that in every sense of despair, faith and trust in God, and appreciation for what you have can get you through the toughest times in life as it is doing for those we visited in the Philippines. I wish to say a big thank you to everyone who had a role in getting me on board this unforgettable and life-changing experience. It was the most heartwarming and touching encounter of my life.



Mission 17 and the children in Bataan learning some Martial Art Skills

TRONG-AN NGUYEN: "Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Jesus Christ for you" (1 Thessalonians 5:18). Being in the Philippines made me realise that there is a mutual aura of gratitude shared between everyone.

From listening to an old lady's story in Bataan who had everything taken away from her, to feeding and doing the laundry for the abandoned children at the Missionaries of Charity; it wasn't until then that I understood that they did not expect anything from me. Not money, not gifts, not sympathy, they simply appreciated my presence. The people of Manila and Bataan willingly accepted gifts and donations, but they showed more gratitude when time was spent with them.

What I saw was that these people had significantly lesser things than we do, but they still had love and happiness. I realised that I enjoyed their presence, because it allowed me to witness that although they have less than what they need, they were still able to appreciate the gifts that were given to them by God. This was when it occurred to me that the feeling of gratitude was reciprocated between both the people of the Philippines and I.



Marianne, Phuong-Thanh and Rhys engaging with the children on 13th Street.

ANTHONY MUSCATELLO: On the 3rd January 2017, I set off for the second time to the Philippines, with the year 2015 having been the first time. After my first experience, which I profoundly found as an eye opener, this second time I felt the experience to be a more in-depth one. Visiting the orphanage and locals in Thirteenth Street in Manila and all the schools in Bataan were quite familiar to me, however what deeply and immensely moved me this time was that the children who I had met on my last trip actually remembered not only my name, but me. This was so overwhelming. What I found quite confronting on this trip was what I saw and heard walking through the local homes in Bataan. What I truly found difficult to cope with was seeing the suffering being endured, which I had not seen on my last trip.

I felt really comfortable on this trip, not only for the fact that I had been there before, but I realised that I felt quite comfortable with an inner peace embodying me, making me feel like I was in my own home. Knowing that I had to bid farewell to the community in Bataan was to me, the most difficult task. After having spent time with them since we first arrived,

the atmosphere had embroiled me into such an inner connection that I felt I could not break nor tear myself away from. The group with whom I travelled with was truly amazing as we all connected so easily and strongly which made us work extremely well. I could not have asked for a better group of people. After seeing the progress that has taken place with our donations has made me even more proud to be a Young Paulist and inspires me to further continue with this path of being a fundraiser to enable the MSSP's ongoing support.



Geralyn, Taryn, Asalemo and Simon shopping for school supplies for the local schools in Bataan, with the donations from the St James Community.

THOMAS SIA: As I packed for the 2017 Mission Immersion Experience, I felt excited because I was going back to my motherland. However, as the M17 team slowly got together at the airport, the reason as to why we had been chosen to embark on this journey had evoked feelings of anxiety and fear of the unknown.

Once we arrived in Bataan, we were kindly greeted by Fr. Joe. During our stay in Bataan we held workshops which allowed us to get to know the children that come to the Formation Centre. Every afternoon, we would gather and without fail, they all had the biggest smiles on their faces. This showed us how much of an impact Fr. Joe has had in the community; his tireless acts of kindness and generosity to make sure the children stay out of trouble and are Christ-centred.

Throughout this 2 week journey, I was exposed to global issues such as poverty. The trip taught me that

even through poverty and injustice, you can be happy and content because of the love, faith, hope and support shared within the community and what it truly means to be servants of God; much like Joseph De Piro, founder of the MSSP.

MIA ARE: 2016 was an incredibly hard year for me; I was losing my way in faith, constantly questioning the existence of God and asking why he let certain things in life happen. I'm grateful that I was invited to come on this journey, as it has taught me so much more than I expected. I am so lucky to have been with an incredible, supportive, and kind hearted group. We shared times of sadness and whenever someone was feeling down, another was there to pick them back up.

Seeing love and joy in the communities of the Missionary Society of Saint Paul in the Philippines has left me wanting to do more for others. Each of them, from the priests to the children in Bataan, are all amazing in their own way. This experience has taught me to be more accepting of myself, to get out of my shell, to have more strength in my faith and pride in my identity, and has brought back memories of my father which I will continue to cherish as the years go on. I will never forget the things I have learned, the people I have met and the connections I've made with others.



Asalemo, Geralyn and Fr Jude teaching the children how to make Rosary Beads for the community of St James

ASALEMO TOFETE: It wasn't until the final reflection/debrief that this message finally made sense. Being my second trip to the Philippines, my eyes had become a little more accustomed to what was in store for me. The cultural shock no longer had a deep hold of me, and I could begin to look beyond the emotional part of the journey and started to experience the good things in this world that I had stepped into. To feel and see God through the work of the MSSP, the work of the Sisters of Charity, the work of the Franciscan sisters to the beautiful changes brought by the work of the Mayor of Bataan, simply known as Gila.

One of the most confronting moments was meeting the brothers at the formation house and hearing of the ministries they are individually involved in, this harsh reality check brought about questions regarding my own journey through faith, in the end the work that they all do has really affirmed my faith in the Church, my faith in humanity and especially my faith in God. The MSSP really are a living testament to Jesus' call to 'put out into the deep'.

RHYS WILLIAMS: Upon leaving Melbourne I felt both nervous and excited to get to the Philippines to start making a difference. Even with all the information provided, it was very hard to know what exactly to expect. I think that the first true experience I had of the Philippines was meeting the children and families of the squatters. It almost felt like an oxymoron, seeing their massive smiles and abundance of happiness among their poor living conditions. I don't think I've ever seen people so genuinely happy to meet new people and it was a theme that continued on every stop of our mission.

It was very rewarding to see the difference that our community's contributions have made to the people of the Philippines. It often feels impossible for us to make much of a difference to people so far away with so little, however seeing the work that had been done with the communities in the Philippines made me realise the impact of the work that the MSSP does and the generous contributions of the Australian community. We were lucky enough to witness how many children and families were better off with our contributions and how much it all meant to them.

Coming back to Australia I feel incredibly lucky to have had the opportunity to make a difference in the world and to gain perspective on my life and others. I feel motivated to make the most of every opportunity I have because others aren't as fortunate and that I am able to use my opportunities to make the world a better place.



Members of Mission 17 teaching the local women how to cook Chicken Parmigiana

PHUONG-THANH NGUYEN: It seemed simple at the start. To travel to the Philippines and make a positive impact through embracing the charism of the Paulist Missionaries. I was ready to serve, and ready to try and make a difference. What I wasn't ready for, however, was how confronting it was going to become.

There's a difference between seeing poverty and immersing yourself in it. We met and interacted with many, heard most of their stories and experienced their lifestyles and hardships. I felt hopelessness, guilt and at times – anger. How could some people live with such little while others have plenty – and still complain? My own problems I had back in Australia now seemed so trivial and unimportant.

The experiences I had with the people there were enlightening. I learnt that happiness could be found everywhere. God can be found anywhere. And with God came hope. The children were happy, joyful and loving. They did not let their current situation define who they were, but instead had dreams for the future and hope for the present. Our short visits to

orphanages, communities and schools showed me that every action – no matter how little – could still bring a smile.



Mission 17 with the School Children in Batchiwan

The trip gave me an appreciation for what I had, a greater understanding of our global issues and strengthening in my relationship with God. It served as an inspiration for me to keep living my life through mission by doing every little bit to help – not only the poor and marginalised – but everybody within my community.

MARIANNE ARRIERO: Right before I left, I had doubts about the mission. Being born as a Filipino and having visited the country several times since. I thought, “what difference does it even make for these people?” And towards the end I had even more questions like “why do bad things happen to good people?” And “how could you let them suffer like you did Jesus?” I could honestly say it was one of the lowest points of my faith. But as I sat in reflection, the first thing Fr. Jude read out was this quote from the wall it said;

‘If you never felt pain; How would you know I’m the healer? If you never felt sadness; How would you know that I’m the comforter? If life is perfect; will you still know me.’

It put everything in perspective for me, giving me a sense of purpose for being on this trip. I saw God in people like Fr. Joe who is like a father to the children and people of Bataan. It showed me that these people were not alone in their suffering by seeing God in them and it strengthened my faith. We came to give out freely but in return we received even more abundantly.

GERALYN MCCARTHY: The opportunity to be part of Mission 17 is something that I will treasure forever! Through this cross-cultural immersion experience, I feel an even deeper commitment to live out of the Paulist charism of missionary service: to challenge injustice and division, and to encounter Christ in all who are poor and are suffering, whether that is locally or on a global scale.

It was inspiring to witness the noble ways in which the MSSP brothers and priests minister to the marginalised and impoverished people in the Philippines. This is indeed a church which “steps outside of herself”, providing me with a new vista through which to see the work of the universal church.

Much of what I saw – and heard about – remains deeply confronting. Witnessing the stark divide between the world’s rich and poor and the enormity of abject poverty and alienation was overwhelming. As Christian sojourners, we developed relationships with people who suffer beyond what we can imagine, and this was challenging. I came to see that we ourselves are wounded, and it is precisely this brokenness that binds us all together as the members of the Body of Christ. I am left with a profound sense of peace, knowing that God was very immanent and that this was indeed a grace-filled experience. By entering into solidarity with our brothers and sisters, I can no longer look with indifference at the divisions that distort the oneness of Christ’s Body. My life will be forever changed.

MISSION 17: Wish to thank the St James Parish Community, St James the Apostle Primary School, St Francis of Assisi Primary School, Thomas Carr College The Wyndham Catholic Women’s League, the Knights of the Southern Cross and the Corazon Centre for your prayers, well-wishes and donations. We would also like to thank Sheryn Mallillin (*mssp Liaison Officer*), Edition Custom T-Shirts (*Werribee*) and Garwood & Turner Travel Associates (*Carlton*) for your role in preparing and organising the Mission Experience. And finally, we wish to thank the MSSP Community in the Philippines, for gifting us with a life changing experience.

