

## From the Director...



Dear Mission Friends:

For us Catholics, **May is the month of Mary.** The Gospel of John tells us that Jesus looked down from the Cross and saw below Mary, His mother, and John, His beloved disciple. For the early Christians, John represented all of us because through our Baptism, we too are the “beloved disciples” of Jesus. Jesus looked to Mary and said, “Behold thy son,” and He looked to John and said, “Behold thy mother.” At that moment all of us Christians received Mary, the mother of Jesus, as our mother. Brother Stephen Maria Lopez, O.P., in this article on his experiences at the Tala Leper Colony, also invites us in this month of May to reflect upon the Blessed Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus, mother of us all.

In Christ’s Peace,

Fr. Martin de Porres Walsh, O.P.

## Honoring “Mama Mary”

Br. Stephen Maria Lopez, O.P.

**T**hough I have never lived there, it was a homecoming of sorts. The broad smiles, colorful native costumes, and dulcet sounds of the *rondalla* string ensemble provided a very festive welcome. I made my way to the baggage claim and watched the seemingly endless stream of luggage and gift-laden *balikbayan* boxes on the carousel. Grabbing my own suitcase, I scurried through customs inspection and exited the air-conditioned building. My senses were immediately greeted by the tropical island climate and the cacophony of car horns, taxi drivers soliciting business, and eager folks seeking their newly-arrived loved ones. Amidst all this I recognized the familiar voice of my cousin, “Kuya!”--the title of respect meaning elder brother. This was my fourth trip to the Philippines, the land of my ancestors. This visit, however, was different from my previous ones; I now came as a religious sent for a mission experience with our Filipino Dominican friars and sisters.

The Philippines is the only predominantly Christian nation in Asia. Known throughout the world for their special devotion to the

Blessed Mother, Filipinos are “*a people in love with Mary.*” (Address of His Holiness John Paul II to the Episcopal Conference of the Philippines, 14 January 1995, 8)

This filial piety is evidenced in the country’s many churches which honor Our Lady and in its people’s affectionate title for her, “*Mama Mary.*” For Filipinos, Mary is not merely a distant figure from history, an abstract theological concept, or an ornately adorned statue. She is very much a real person playing a major role in their daily lives. She is, after all, the mother of God and their mother as well—their “*Mama.*”



*Shrine of Our Lady of the Rosary,  
Manaoag, Pangasinan*



*Br. Stephen with two residents at Tala.*

Two famous Dominican shrines under the patronage of Our Lady of the Rosary are located in Quezon City, Metro Manila and Manaoag, Pangasinan. During my time in the Philippines, I had the privilege of visiting both holy sites. My time in Manaoag was personally significant because it had been a favorite place of my late paternal grandmother. Staffed by Dominicans since 1605, Manaoag is one of the nation's most revered Marian shrines, drawing thousands of devotees each year.

Daily Mass is celebrated at every hour beginning at 5:00 AM until 11:00 AM. To accommodate the many pilgrims on weekends, the friars offer ten Sunday Masses. Even with the high number of visitors, the shrine remains a surprisingly prayerful place. I beheld people of all ages and walks of life lighting candles and patiently waiting in line to venerate the image of Our Lady of the Rosary. As devotees approached the statue, I observed their tender expressions of faith in ardently mouthed petitions and their kissing of the *manto* or cloak. Through the liturgy and quiet moments enjoyed in the church

and its environs, I contemplated with Mary the face of her Son. I treasured this special gift because our Dominican preaching is deeply rooted in prayer.

**M**anaoag is the site of the Dominican Novitiate of the Annunciation, the formation house for novices of the Philippine province of friars. Blessed with many vocations, there were eighteen novices from four different countries.

One evening, I gave a talk to the novices, sharing my vocation story and experience of religious life in the United States. I also had the pleasure of meeting the Religious Missionaries of St. Dominic. Known as the *Misioneras*, these joyful Dominican sisters run Our Lady of Manaoag College, which is adjacent to the shrine.

Spiritually refreshed, I returned to Manila and spent some time at the Dominican seminary. I enjoyed interacting with my fellow student brothers and comparing how Dominican life is lived in another country. Although I noted some marked cultural differences, I discovered that certain practices and attitudes are universal among Dominicans. I chuckled knowingly, for example, when the younger friars griped about mandatory choir practice! In addition, I

joined the brothers for classes at the Royal and Pontifical University of Santo Tomas. Founded by Spanish Dominican friars in 1611, it is the oldest university and among the best in the Philippines.

A missionary sometimes finds himself in precarious situations. For me, the challenge was the mayhem of Metro Manila traffic, arguably the worst in the world. More than once, I silently invoked Our Lady's intercession, *Ay, Santisima!* En route to my next destination, our very capable driver nimbly maneuvered our van through the maze of cars and laneless streets. When we veered off the main road, the words of Sr. Rosa Yaya, O.P., were music to my ears: "*Malapit na tayo.*" ("We're almost there.")

I peered out the window, eyeing the colorfully decorated *jeepneys* which serve as public transportation. Reading the hand-painted lettering indicating their destinations, I noticed the word "*Malaria.*" I nervously questioned myself, "A *place* named Malaria?! What was I getting myself into?" I was in fact making the same journey that my Dominican confrere, the late Father Leo Hofstee, had often traveled years ago. While serving in the Philippines as an Air Force chaplain during the Second World

*Former patients displaying their wares at the outdoor market in the Tala Leper Colony.*





*Students line up to present flowers at the tomb of Fr. Hofstee.*

War, Fr. Hofstee had discovered the village of Tala, an entire community of lepers. Ostracized from the outside world because of fear of contagion, the lepers existed in squalid conditions with inadequate food, housing, health care and education. Profoundly moved by these deplorable circumstances, Fr. Hofstee expressed an intense desire to serve the suffering Christ:

*Dear Jesus... let me see in the need of the leper, Thy need; in his cry for help, Thy cry. Let me see in every leper, Thyself, O Lord, that I may always serve Thee through him. ("The Lepers of Tala," Time, 20 August 1951.)*

This prayer was answered when Fr. Hofstee, after his military discharge, returned to Tala and dedicated the rest of his life to the spiritual and material needs of those afflicted with Hansen's disease.

I stayed at the house built by Fr. Hofstee, a simple two story dwelling which is now home to the Dominican Brothers of St. Martin de Porres. This community, which counts lepers among its membership, was founded to serve those suffering from the disease.

It was a delight to share in the brothers' common life and to experience their apostolate. I visited the nearby leprosarium with them on several occasions and was impressed by their dedication. As I looked upon the disfigured faces of the patients and listened to their stories, I recalled the words of Christ, *"Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me."* (Mt 25:40) The joyful simplicity of the Martinian Brothers and of the people whom they serve was truly remarkable.

Aside from the hospital, Tala is also home to Holy Rosary College, the school founded by Fr. Hofstee and presently administered by the Dominican Sisters of Our Lady of Remedies. It offers free primary-through tertiary-level education to all lepers and their children. Fewer students show symptoms of leprosy than in the past, but all of them are in some way connected to a family member with Hansen's disease.

The community of Tala has made significant progress, but remains a predominantly low-income area. As one volunteer explained, "Brother, *walang mayaman dito.*" ("There are no rich people here.") Unlike most of the nearby private schools which primarily educate students from middle- and upper-class families, Holy Rosary College carries on its mission to provide the poor with a solid Catholic education.

In the college department, the school offers teaching degrees. The original vision was to qualify lepers to teach their fellow lepers at Holy Rosary College. Now with the disease under greater control, the school's alumni not only teach in Tala, but in schools throughout the Philippines.

My visit to Tala coincided with the novena in honor of St. Dominic. As a Dominican institution, the school observed this feast with great solemnity. Before the daily Mass, the students, faculty and staff gathered in the church for the Rosary and novena prayers. I was invited to preach the third day of the novena. Though I speak the national language with relative ease, I never formally studied it and lack knowledge of theological terms. So, I sheepishly asked Sr. Rosa, "Do you want me to preach

*Preparing for Founder's Day.*





*Children playing in the streets of Tala.*

in English or Tagalog?" She smiled and replied, "Tagalog, of course!" As a missionary, one learns to adapt and make do. I thus shared my "Taglish" reflection on the theme, *Pagsasaliksik sa katotohanan* (Searching for Truth.)

I also had the privilege of being a guest teacher at Holy Rosary College and was asked to give two lectures in the high school department: "*The Church as Community*" and "*The Church as the Mystical Body of Christ.*" The students were a bit timid at first, but loosened up over the course of my talks. During the question-and-answer sessions, we shared many laughs as the teenagers expressed curiosity about life in the United States and my path to the Dominican Order.

The highlight of my time at Holy Rosary College was the celebration of Founder's Day which commemorates Fr. Hofstee's birthday. The festivities included a special Mass presided by Fr. Allen de Guzman, O.P. A gifted and fun-loving priest, he engaged the youth with his dynamic preaching, encouraging them to see Christ at work in their lives and to serve Him with generosity and love.

As the students sang hymns, flowers were presented at the tomb of Fr. Hofstee. The school then erupted with joyful noise as the students competed in the various games that had been organized for the occasion. Since Filipino celebrations are incomplete without entertainment, the day ended with a "Praise Song and Interpretive Dance" contest. Much preparation went into these wonderful presentations. I smiled as I watched each class from the elementary school through college level depict the life and legacy of Fr. Hofstee through music, dance, and drama. Founder's Day was indeed a beautiful celebration enjoyed by all.

**A**s I reflect on my mission experience, I realize that I was deeply touched by the poor of Tala. I saw in them a growing awareness of God's providential care through the ministry of the Dominicans. This generated in me a sense of profound gratitude but also challenged me to deepen my love for Christ.

Pope Benedict XVI, in his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, begins his meditation with a verse from the first letter of St. John: "*God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.*" (1 John 4:16) The Holy Father explains:

*Love is the light—and in the end, the only light—that can always illuminate a world grown dim and give us the courage needed to keep living and working. Love is possible, and we are able to practise it because we are created in the image of God. (39)*

Clearly understanding this great human capacity to love, Fr.

Hofstee bore the light of love to the people of Tala. He recognized Jesus in each leper, looking beyond any disfigurement to the presence of Christ the Light radiating in every soul. It comes as no surprise, then, that Fr. Hofstee often sang to them with glee, "You Are My Sunshine."

Few of us are called to be missionaries to the lepers like Fr. Hofstee, but we are all made by the Creator, as the Holy Father teaches, "*to experience love and in this way to cause the light of God to enter into the world.*" (*Deus Caritas Est*, 39)

*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself. (Luke 10:27)*

My prayer for each of you, our missionary co-workers, is that you may continue to open your hearts to Christ. For when God is the sole treasure of our hearts, we are filled with His love and become the saints that He created us to be. We become more and more like our "Mama Mary," who faithfully said "Yes" that God might love others through her.

### **May 2008 Mission Appeals**

*We are grateful that we have been invited to speak on our missionary work at the following parish. If you are in the area, please come out and meet Fr. Vincent Lopez, O.P. at the weekend Masses.*

May 24-25, 2008

St. Thomas More Parish  
San Francisco, California  
Preaching: Fr. Vincent Lopez