



## EDUCATION AND COMMUNION

### US PROVINCE 2019

*(Sharing of experiences of Communion by Sr. Gertrude)*

Given the few number of Sisters in the US Province, and the limited options to enter the formal field of education, when I arrived in the US, I converted an apparent limitation into an opportunity, seeing as a **STRENGTH - the diversity of peoples and cultures among whom we live, the low income and the migrants and refugees**, especially in the West Philadelphia neighborhood where the community resides and in Our Lady of Hope Parish, a poor section of Philadelphia which had 3 primary ethnic communities (African-American, with a sprinkling of Caucasians as there was a 'white flight of residents' in the 60's, the Hispanic Community and the Asians, primarily Filipino migrants who had migrated to the US) where I work as a Directress for Evangelization and Social Ministry, and today is expanded to 38 ethnic communities, as Directress for the Archdiocesan Office for the Pastoral Care for Migrants and Refugees.

This has been my guiding principle in my pastoral ministry, be it in the parish, archdiocese, and neighborhood: work out a 'creative pastoral educative way of *'forming communities where we hope those we come in contact with, become capable of finding in themselves the strength to assume their own history in order to change it.'*... *'transform society in our little sphere according to the Gospel.... towards COMMUNION.. where each one is a brother, a sister, a friend... in a faith community that lives justice (right relationships) and solidarity (being there for one another).*

My sacred journey started 7 years ago (2013 – 2019) when I arrived in the US. With the parishioners, in Our Lady of Hope, we had a dream: **Rooted in Christ, be a Eucharistic community: a parish for social change.** The goal was to create **COMMUNION among the diverse multi-cultural communities through a LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION FORMATION PROGRAM FOR SOCIAL CHANGE.**

This strategy unified my pastoral work with the different ethnic communities, along four phases, with the support of the CCHD funding grant:

#### **Phase I: 2015-2016**

##### **Mobilization and Inter-cultural Openness of the Parishioners**

With the parish leaders, we participated in the 5 Formation Sessions which awakened the parish leaders to the social reality of poverty, racism, criminal injustice, and immigration. They joined in the social manifestations for just wages. **A new social consciousness** led to the organization of a core group of parishioners wanting to work for social justice and evangelization known as the **St. Martin de Porres Core Group of Volunteers**. They aimed to work for **CULTURAL OPENNESS IN THE PARISH**, and engage in the **IMMIGRATION ISSUE**.

#### **Phase II: 2016 – 2017**

##### **Community Formation and Leadership**

The USCCB (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops) launched the **Formation Program 'BUILDING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE FOR MINISTERS'**. I facilitated this formation program with Archdiocesan Team which became the key to growing in communion: intercultural interactions as they met and learned from each other, about each other, of their social realities and problems, cultural values and beliefs, and the common imperative of what it means to live a 'faith that does justice'. I gave Bible Classes from a social, Biblical and ecclesial perspective.

### **Phase III: 2017 - 2018**

#### **Networking and collaboration among local community leaders**

Community leaders agreed to give BICM Sessions. These sessions brought a total of 250 parishioners from the African-American, Caucasian, Hispanics, and Vietnamese and Filipino cultural communities for the past two years. **Leaders emerged** who helped facilitate the 5-week sessions with invited resource persons. A 'formal space' was provided for open and honest conversations about attitudes and prejudices of one another; as well as a growing respect for differences in cultures, and acts of solidarity to help the victims of hurricanes in Puerto Rico and Houston, Texas.

The **PASTORAL DISCERNMENT WEEK-END** in November 2017 capped the BICM Formation experience as the 50 parish leaders reflected on what they learned and a looking-back on the 25 years with relevant Church documents. A theme and a direction was articulated for the parish in the next three years (2019 – 2021), highlighted by the twin- celebration of the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Our Lady of Hope Parish and the priestly ordination of Rev. Efren Esmilla, its pastor:

**THEME: ONE GOD, ONE PARISH, AND MANY CULTURES DEDICATED TO SERVICE.**  
**DIRECTION: Rejoice, celebrate and live our diversity in Christ!**

### **Phase IV: 2018- 2019**

#### **Implementation of Pastoral Projects: EMPOWERING WORKSHOPS by parish leaders in partnership with Holy Family University**

1. **A Healthy and Sustainable Community Garden:** known as 'a thread of hope ministry'
  - **Sr. Mary Catherine** facilitates this community garden with the 7 volunteers have faithfully tended the garden; and their produce is shared on Sunday Masses in exchange for a free-will donation. Student volunteers from La Salle help in the planting or harvesting. The stay-in refugees in the Old Convent help in the garden.
  - Workshops for the volunteers are given to have a spirituality for 'the care for creation', and to be 'team leaders'.
2. **Food Pantry:** Leaders - Bernice Oakman and Evelyn Bailey facilitate a bi-weekly food supplement given to families and parishioners in need, in partnership with the Nutritional Development Services of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. Nutritional education is given for healthy food and lifestyle by the student nurses of Holy Family University.
3. **Arts Creativity for Self-Employment: Sheila Henderson,** a parish volunteer has offered to teach **ARTS Crafts in Jewelry Accessories.** Entrepreneurial skills are taught them by Holy Family University business professors.
4. **English as a Second Language (ESL) and Growing Proficiency in English:** Like the ESL Program in Paschalville Library, this is an important program to bring about social change for language can empower people, not only for a job but for integration in US society.
5. **Biblical and Ecclesial Formation for Solidarity:** I give Bible classes to a multi-cultural group in the parish on Wednesdays afternoons. This has deepened their understanding of Scripture and growth in their Christian faith.

6. **Young Adults and Youth Ministry:** The PCMR Young Adults meet regularly to support them in their faith as they take their place in the world; and to see the importance of participating in the parish and to serve the wider community in solidarity. They have done pilgrimages with the Assumption Young People in 2017, in New York with the immigration ‘saints’ (Frances Cabrini, Elizabeth Ann Seton, Peter Toussaint, and Dorothy Day), and this year in the Abbey of Gethsemani for a Vocational Discernment.

**Communion** has grown among them as a faith community in mission.



Since April 2019 as **Directress to the Archdiocesan Office for the Pastoral Care for Migrants and Refugees**, the accompaniment of the leaders of 38 ethnic communities, and the annual retreats of the US based alumnae of the Assumption Schools in the Philippines – is a pastoral educative way of working for human development within the community, fostering a sense of solidarity with the social groups.... to find not only a ‘better economic future’ but a VOICE and a rootedness in their home-COMMUNITY as well as in the complexity of American culture....

And in all these, appreciate that in the peripheries of American society, we can live communion among ourselves as Sisters and among these diverse communities.

Few we may be, but we have seen that the *‘field of education is immense (#81)*, and’ *love never says, ‘it is enough!’ (#90)*