

# SPOTLIGHT INTERVIEW

## An Interview with Fr. Manuel Ginete, C.M.

Member of Province of the Philippines



John T. Maher, C.M.,  
with Manuel Ginete, C.M.

### ***Editor's Note***

This interview features Fr. Manuel Ginete from Province of the Philippines. Fr. Manny now ministers in one of the 'newest' countries in the world: South Sudan, which gained independence from Sudan in 2011. It is a country with much unrest, as it transitions to an independent nation. In 2008, the Union of Superior Generals in Rome sponsored an inter-congregational mission effort to strengthen the Catholic Church in South Sudan. At this time, Fr. Manny was Director of the Vincentian Family Office at the Curia, and decided to volunteer for this project in South Sudan. He lives in Juba City, capital of South Sudan. With religious from various Congregations, he assists the Bishops, clergy, and Catholics there to establish programs and structures that will enable them to be a vibrant, active Church.

### ***Describe your family background, education, and how you came to know the Congregation.***

I come from a family of nine siblings, with seven other brothers and one sister. All are still living, except my brother Rodrigo, who recently died. I attended a high school sponsored by the Daughters of Charity. Fr. Teodimo Pacis, a Vincentian priest, came to our school on occasion,

so I got to know him. I believe he was the rector of the Archdiocesan seminary. After I graduated, I entered the Vincentian minor seminary, and then I went to the novitiate. Following the novitiate, I was sent to the United States to study, and went to seminaries of the Western Province (at that time, it was known as the Midwest Province). I studied at their college seminary in Perryville, Missouri, and then went onto the Vincentian theologate in Lemont, Illinois.

Even though I was far away from my home, my family, and confreres from the Philippines, I was at peace because of the high quality of community life and good example of confreres in this province. I was ordained on June 5, 1976 in Chicago by Cardinal Cody. In my ordination class were Fathers Dan Borlik, Pat Murphy, and Jim Cormack. At that time, there was much political unrest in the Philippines, so my family was unable to come to the ordination. I went home to the Philippines after ordination, and celebrated my ordination with my family and confreres.

***What assignments have you held since ordination? Which had a profound influence on you?***

Upon my return to the Philippines after ordination, I was sent to a seminary in Angono, where I served for four years as director of students in both the college and theologate. In 1980, I went to Belgium, where I studied for a doctorate in Theology at the Katholieke Universiteit Lueven (Louvain). I received a PhD Religious Studies (Theology) degree in Systematic Theology. I found the experience of study there to be an excellent one, I recommended it to my confreres, and several did go to Louvain. When I returned to the Philippines, I was assigned to the major seminary in Cebu, where I served as the Rector from 1986 to 1998, after which I was elected the Visitor of the Province of the Philippines.

Being rector was my most important and fruitful assignment because we were able to re-fashion the curriculum and to participate in the Diocesan Synod and the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines in 1991. This was a gathering for the entire Catholic Church in the Philippines. It was an important milestone. The first one had been held in the 1950's, which the CM's helped plan and run. But this one was planned and run by the diocesan clergy and laity. A majority of the people at this Synod were laity, so it was encouraging to see that the seeds planted by our confreres before my time had grown and flourished. A number of bishops at the first Synod were Vincentians, but today Church leadership in the Philippines is truly representative of our people from across the nation. Ultimately, this is a tribute to the work of the confreres before me.

***You helped expand the Vincentian Family Office in Rome. Can you describe how this work increased your appreciation of our charism?***

I tried to build on the good work started by Father Benjamin Rojo of the Province of Mexico, who founded the Vincentian Family Office under the direction of Father Robert Maloney, then Superior General. I decided to expand by engaging members of the Vincentian Family from Asia and Africa. We developed a great outreach to Africa, Asia, South America, and “new areas” such as the Ukraine, after the Vice-Province of Sts. Cyril and Methodius was founded.

I also focused on developing ties with other religious communities who have appropriated our charism, including the Sisters of Charity in Strasbourg, France, the Sisters of Charity Federation of the USA and Canada, and the Brothers and Sisters of Our Lady Mother of Mercy in Holland. It was an exciting, invigorating six years from 2004-2010. I came to know so many people who were committed to the Vincentian charism and to putting into practice the ways of St. Vincent. The plan at that time was for me to visit annually with Vincentian Family members. I also became spiritual advisor for the international AIC. It was a good experience, as they are a forward-looking, professional organization. Like the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, they are totally committed to our charism.

***What led you to undertake your current ministry in South Sudan?***

Well, after six years of working with the international Vincentian Family, it seemed like the most logical next step for me, as it is work with the poor in a place where the Catholic Church is resource-poor. It was also attractive to me to work with an inter-congregational group willing to collaborate in assisting the Church in South Sudan. In 2008, I learned the details of a plan to do this; I saw the materials and decided that after my term, I would like to make my contribution to their efforts. The project was founded by the USG (Union of Superiors General – Men) and UISG (Union of International Superiors General – Women), and undertaken in collaboration with the South Sudan Bishops Conference. In 2011, with the blessing of my Visitor and our Superior General, I volunteered and went to South Sudan.

***Describe your work in Southern Sudan. What is the status of the Catholic Church there?***

The ministry in South Sudan involves training teachers, health care workers (nurses and midwives), and providing programs of ongoing formation for pastoral workers. I am involved specifically in developing

pastoral teams and lay formation. I coordinate the overall pastoral team. Our focus is on capacity-building of diocesan pastoral teams, to provide ongoing formation of priests, religious, and catechists. I am directly mentoring the national pastoral director, a South Sudan priest. We are trying to re-establish pastoral structures for the diocese, and to develop a strategic plan along with developing a funding plan for sustenance.

In a way, this is great time to be in South Sudan, because the Catholic Church has a very high degree of credibility before the government and NGO's (non-governmental organizations). The credibility is there because the Church chose to be an ally of the people for the establishment of an independent nation and a stable government in South Sudan. The Church there is recognized as an organization with a presence and concern for the welfare of all the people of South Sudan.

In South Sudan, 80% of the population is Christian, over half of whom are Roman Catholics. At the same time, the "infrastructure" of the Church is woefully poor, and in some places, it is non-existent. This is the result of ongoing civil war, poverty, and overall instability, all of which has plagued the lives of the people for decades. Being in South Sudan is like starting over from scratch. However, our presence there has encouraged other Congregations to come and help, so I have hope for the future of the Church and its clergy and people of South Sudan.

There are seven dioceses in South Sudan, but only four have residential bishops. The other three dioceses have been run by apostolic administrators for several years. It is not easy to find native clergy for leadership roles because of the past instability in the country. I have been told that Rome is sensitive to the ethnic makeup of various regions and concerned at the lack of available native clergy, so it is a difficult time for the Church in South Sudan. Even its bishops and clergy are not exempt from the post-war trauma that gripped so much of the country. In fact, the workload and demands on their ministry have intensified their own post-traumatic stress.

***Can you give a brief overview of how South Sudan came into being as a country?***

Sudan has been plagued by civil war on and off since the mid-1950's. Conflicts centered mainly on tribal and religious issues, along with economic issues. The civil war ended in 2005. In 2011, the southern part of Sudan voted for independence, and was recognized the South Sudan by the United Nations and the African Union. The most recent conflict erupted in 2013, with tensions between the President of South Sudan and a former Vice-President whom he had removed. The Presi-

dent said he did so because he feared the deputy was involved in a planned coup. However, as both men are from different tribes and regions, this grew into a national conflict, reigniting ethnic and tribal rivalries and hostilities. There is currently an official cease-fire, but the dispute between the two political leaders is unresolved, and skirmishes continue across South Sudan.

However, the Church has offered to intervene as a peacemaker and is being represented at the negotiations going on in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Can the people of South Sudan live in peace? Yes, but it will take some doing. Tribal conflict is a reality no matter how you look at it, but can the leaders and the people of South Sudan put aside personal, political, and tribal differences for the good of the country? I sure hope so! In addition to these issues, the other major ongoing concern is an economic one. There are conflicts on how both countries (Sudan and South Sudan) will benefit from oil revenues and mineral rights, as the majority of them are in South Sudan.

### ***What is your living and working situation like in South Sudan?***

It is a simple lifestyle here. We have four inter-congregational religious communities living and working in South Sudan. I live in Juba, the capital city. Juba is our national headquarters and the 'hospitality house' where most of the pastoral team lives and works. In Juba City, we have a mixed community of six religious men and women. Each day, we gather for prayer and share meals together. We live very simply, as there is not much food to buy! We live as simply as we can in order to show our solidarity with the South Sudanese. Food is expensive, because the South Sudanese do not grow their own vegetables. Like the people, we take whatever we get!

In Juba City, security has not yet been a major problem. We move about freely as of now. But if caught in crossfire, it could be a problem. However, when there is a curfew, we observe it. We are located in the heart of the city, near the airport, but not near military garrisons. While Juba City is a 'big village' of almost a million people, it has only one traffic light, one government hospital, and several colleges, two universities, one of which is Catholic and just opened! As it is the capital, many NGO's have their headquarters there, so that does help the local economy.

We do live with some uncertainty and tension, despite our best efforts. For example, Malakal, a small city in the northeast corner of the country, was closed due to civil unrest, so our personnel working there were transferred. This was necessary after the town was razed to the ground by rebels, and our Institute there was raided. Despite this setback, we moved our personnel to other areas to continue serving the Church in South Sudan. Therefore, the work goes on.

***How does the Vincentian charism impact on your work in South Sudan?***

I think it has made me appreciate more deeply who I am as a Vincentian, and I realize there are so many good people trying to do what we do as Vincentians and the Family: serve the poor with humility and simplicity. I view this ministry as a continuation of what I did with the Vincentian Family: work with religious and laity in serving the poor. There is a great need to serve the poor and to form priests. As you know, these are the two essential parts of our charism.

Of course, there are poor people everywhere, but there seemed to be so many in South Sudan. There is so much need for bare basic services for people, especially health care and education as the most urgent. The lack of an infrastructure for the Catholic Church here is a great concern. The theologate and college seminaries were in such short supply of teachers and formators that Rome considered closing both, but the Bishops here begged for more time to get faculty and staff in place. Thank goodness, their request was heard for the theologate. The philosophy division was in under individual dioceses, but it is being reorganized, and will reopen in September 2014.

Here we focus on “training the trainers”, preparing teachers, nurses, midwives, pastoral agents and pastoral directors to put the Church in South Sudan on its feet, so it can grow and flourish. We do a great deal of training, and we have graduated several cohorts of teachers, nurses, and health-care workers. We also visit refugee camps to serve the pastoral needs of the people there. Both the government of South Sudan and the NGO’s support us in this endeavor. The biggest needs of the Church in South Sudan can be summarized as seminary professors and formators to educate and form parish priests, lay formation programs, religious to train health care workers and teachers, an infrastructure for diocesan offices, and funds to support all these efforts.

***How has your time in South Sudan influenced your ministry as a Vincentian? Do you think it might be feasible in the future for the Congregation to open a mission there?***

I think it is a possibility. We need to see what we can do as a Congregation and Vincentian Family to collaborate and expand our charism to South Sudan, which is in great need. I would like to see us assist them. Despite decades of unrest, the Bishops and clergy of South Sudan have been very present and caring to the people. Yet, they too have been traumatized by the violence and civil war. The Bishops started a program (from our pastoral department) on “trauma healing” to help the people and clergy deal with the after-effects of decades of war and civil unrest. The conflicts actually date back as far as the 1950’s, so people feel their effects inter-generationally.

As part of our pastoral duties, we conduct trauma-healing workshops, where we help people understand what has happened, to tell their stories, receive counseling, and engage in certain exercises meant to assist them. It is a carefully developed process, and is constantly monitored and evaluated. We did two workshops in Juba City for religious and clergy who lived through the war and the years of civil unrest. Overall, the reaction has been positive. We sometimes do a trauma-healing workshop as part of a retreat, which has also worked well.

How much longer will I serve in South Sudan? I guess as long as I am needed, or as long as my health will allow. It's a tropical climate without too much humidity. But I firmly believe this is where the Church and the Congregation have called me to be right now.

***Our theme for this issue is the relationship between our charism and Evangelii Gaudium. From your experience at South Sudan, do you have any thoughts you would like to share?***

Yes, I do. A couple of ideas that struck me as I reflected on the challenges posed to us in the Vincentian Family by *Evangelii Gaudium*. I'll begin with a couple of quotes as my reference.

*"Solidarity is a spontaneous reaction by those who recognize that the social function of property and the universal destination of goods are realities which come before private property. The private ownership of goods is justified by the need to protect and increase them, to better serve the common good; thus, solidarity must be lived as the decision to restore to the poor what belongs to them. These convictions and habits of solidarity, when they are put into practice, open the way to other structural transformations and make them possible"* (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 189).

I am happy that Pope Francis devoted two sections in the exhortation specifically to the issue of "solidarity" (EG, 188-189). I live now in the Juba community of our group. The theme of this inter-congregational mission, as articulated by the UISG, our founding organization, is "Solidarity with South Sudan". It is our expressed intention to help build the capacity of pastoral workers in the dioceses of South Sudan. But it is by no means simply a matter of the "have's" doing something for the "have-not's". We see it more as being with the people, especially the poor, in their day-to-day existence, in their joys and difficulties, and in the conflict and insecurity that they presently experience. We see it also as working and sharing closely with other congregations working for the poor, with the Bishops and the clergy of the dioceses, as well as NGO's and other government organizations who are concerned with the poor. And we trust that as we do this, we are proclaiming the reign of God in our midst.

*"For the Church, the option for the poor is primarily a theological category rather than a cultural, sociological, political or philosophical*

*one... This is why I want a Church which is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us... We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them. We are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voice to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them" (EG, 198).*

This is another section in the apostolic exhortation that strikes a chord with me. We in the Vincentian Family have often re-echoed what St. Vincent reminded us: we need to allow ourselves to be evangelized by the poor. But what this means cannot be revealed by discursive meditation. Rather it is by patient and faithful contemplation that we begin to appreciate why God chose to be born in our world as a poor person.

Living in poverty gives us an opportunity to experience the depth of God's love for us, the "mysterious wisdom" that has a room for everyone in need. If we are to know what God wants us to do with the poor, we need to go back to our life with the poor. There, the poor will point us to what God wants. Exactly what Vincent experienced! The inspiration for me *Evangelii Gaudium* is this line: "*That is why I want a Church which is poor and for the poor*". Amen! Alleluia!