

Filipino group bonds through devotion to Virgin Mary

written by Dwain Hebda |



When Carlita Baquial landed in Little Rock for a nursing assignment in 1974, it was just this side of landing on the moon. The area around University Avenue and Markham Street wasn't precisely pastureland, but to the Filipino expat's eyes, it was close.

"I got to Little Rock from Chicago and I couldn't believe it. There were no street lights, there was no highway, there wasn't one Asian store," she recalled. "I remember I thought, 'Oh my Lord, what is this place?'"

"I thought, 'What have I done?' I was used to living in a city, and when I got here, there were no tall buildings," echoed Chita Salazar, who came here directly from her home country in 1975 to work as a nurse. "I left my three children behind, the youngest was just 3 years old. It was a sacrifice."

Both women leaned on faith, and particularly a devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, to sustain them in their new land. Mary is regularly venerated in their native Philippines and separated from family and the familiar, they sought the Blessed Mother's embrace. They weren't alone.

"I don't think there's a Catholic home in the Philippines not devoted to the Blessed Mother," said Nita Cabantac, who's been in Arkansas since 1972. "There is a true belief in her as our liberator and our intercessor."

There might be 1,000 Filipino-born and Filipino-descended Catholics in Central Arkansas scattered throughout various parishes, the bulk of whom worship at Our Lady of Good Counsel Church. It is from there, the church nicknamed "The Stained Glass Parish" for the many ethnicities represented in the congregation, that a group of Filipino Catholics began to gather to share their common faith and heritage.

“The diversity of Good Counsel is what makes it so different,” Baquial said. “If you don’t know somebody, you still say hi to them. Even visitors are welcomed like family. I don’t see that in other churches.”

Salazar and another group member, Precy Divino, were commissioned by Father Tom Keller, Good Counsel’s pastor at the time, to enthrone houses with the Two Hearts — Sacred Heart of Jesus and Immaculate Heart of Mary — and after one such ceremony, the idea for a rosary group was floated to enthusiastic response. The group first met on New Year’s Day 2001 and has continued to meet at least biweekly ever since.

On this occasion, 25 members ranging from middle school to retirement age gather in the west Little Rock home of Carmalita Pablo. A shrine to the Blessed Mother includes candles and the traveling icons that always accompany the group: A statue of Our Lady of Fatima, an olive wood cross, a Divine Mercy statue and a framed picture of Our Lady of All Nations on a gilded stand. The items remain in the host home between meetings of the group.

Close your eyes at the prayer gathering and it’s hard to detect anything foreign; the prayers and songs are all in English and familiar. Intentions are for sick and deceased family members and everyone participates, particularly during the rosary when leading the Hail Marys passes from person to person around the room. A glance at the faces during prayer, however, show that even a dozen years into this ministry, the depth of feeling is still there.

“This is not just our strength and our faith, but where two or three are gathered, there is Jesus,” Cabantac said. “The more prayers, the more we are bound together in faith. We are a chorus and the more voices, the more it blends together.”

Every meeting ends with a communal potluck dinner, featuring traditional Filipino fare. During the meal, Salazar told of the group’s other activities, including a yearly medical mission to the homeland that many members of the group attend. Such missions are sponsored by hosts in the Philippines and bring basic medical services to the rural poor. There’s also a pilgrimage to the National Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows in Belleville, Ill., the group takes during Holy Week.

Now retired, Salazar sees all of this as merely an extension of what she grew up with in the Philippines, where traveling “block rosary” groups are common. She delights in the non-Filipino members it has attracted, stressing over and over that the group is for anyone and everyone.

“We’re all mixed,” she said of the members. “It’s good to have this and it’s good to have the intermingling of cultures. It makes things interesting.”

Baquial agreed, saying many members have been in the U.S. for so long they self-identify as Americans anyway. Newer immigrants are welcomed in and thereby provided a resource for understanding life in the U.S. that can take some adjustment, even if it’s not as pronounced as it used to be.

“It’s so good to have a group to support you and pray for you,” Baquial said. “I’m a cancer survivor and when I was sick and in the hospital the whole group came over to see me. People who have had deaths in their family or all of their family is gone have this strong support group that’s just so close.”