

The MSP Priest Associate Program

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Priestly spiritually should also be missionary, since the priest is ordained not only for a particular diocese but for the salvation of the whole world. He is reminded by the Eucharist, which he daily celebrates, that Christ shed his blood “for all.” And so, the priestly heart, nourished by the Eucharist, reaches out to all in love.

The priest’s love is without frontiers; his thirst for souls knows no bounds. Imbued with missionary zeal, he will ignite the same fire in the hearts of the members of the Christian community over which he presides. His missionary spirit urges him to open his eyes to the needs of the missions and, by prayer and material support, can truly assist in the missionary task. And, when a priest feels God is calling him to announce the good news in other lands, he will joyfully respond. Home for him is where God calls him (cf. *PCP II*, 551).

MSP Associate Program. This is a program established by the Mission Society of the Philippines (MSP) in order to accommodate Filipino diocesan priests who have a missionary vocation. Bishop Jimmy Afable, an MSP Associate who was a Fil-Missionary in the Solomon Islands for three years, noted the following in his article “Learning and Envisioning Fil-Mission.”

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diocesan priests who feel the stirrings of the missionary vocation. These are priests who desire to dedicate some years of their lives to experience foreign mission. These are priests who already had some years of ministry in their local churches and who will later bring their giftedness to their areas of foreign mission. Naturally, it is meant to be a temporary commitment by the very nature of their fundamental and radical connection to their dioceses.”

Truly, this is for diocesan priests who are willing to share their priestly vocation, their many years of ministry and their giftedness with people in mission lands. Change of diocesan status is a non-issue in this program. An MSP Associate remains a diocesan priest during the whole duration of his being with the MSP. His being a missionary to a foreign land adds a new dimension to his priesthood. But it is his identity as a diocesan priest that makes him a unique missionary. His many years of experience of ministry in the parishes within his home diocese could be a rich basis for a fruitful exchange, dialogue and sharing with the people of another distinct cultural and religious heritage.

MSP Associate Program Answers Various Needs. First, it answers the basic need of the Church to be missionary. The Associate Member carries with him his identity as a diocesan priest when he goes to his foreign mission area. He then becomes



the personification and actualization of the diocese's noble intention to reach out and share, even in their great needs. Thus, this particular diocese becomes "a Church in communion in the state of mission."

Secondly, the program adds a missionary and universal dimension to what is naturally a parochial/diocesan orientation of the priest. It widens his perspective and understanding of the Church. Furthermore, his missionary experiences enrich both the local and Universal Church.

Thirdly, the MSP program responds to a much greater need of the young local Churches in mission areas. These young Churches cannot yet stand on their own. That is why the valuable experience of the diocesan priest is of vital importance. The diocesan priest in mission becomes a beautiful expression of the exchange, sharing and mutual support between local Churches. The sending Church reaches out and shares her faith experience with the young and growing receiving Church in a mission land.

Historical Background. When MSP was established in 1965 during the fourth centennial of Christianity in the Philippines which was celebrated in Cebu, the first few members were diocesan priests who volunteered to be sent to foreign mission. The bishops themselves opened

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the doors and encouraged their local priests to go on mission for a number of years and then come back to the diocese. Hence, MSP was then an inter-diocesan missionary society.

However, as the society embarked on a massive campaign for new members, the focus shifted to the recruitment and formation of young high school and college seminarians. The vital role of the diocesan priest in foreign mission began to fade away. And, since then, the idea of an active participation of the local clergy in mission *ad gentes* of the Philippines Church slowly drifted away into oblivion. No more diocesan priests were in mission.

In the late 1980s there was a growing missionary interest among the local clergy. There were a few who considered a foreign mission assignment, but they had no idea how it could be done since there was no program yet at that time. Monsignor Tom Gonsales, having been the Archdiocesan Mission Director of Manila for many years, broke the silence as he volunteered to go to Papua New Guinea despite the absence of a clear-cut program for a diocesan priest like him. He rekindled the possibility for the local clergy to actively participate in foreign mission.

Establishment of the MSP Associate Program. In response to this particular issue and to answer the need of diocesan priests who are interested to go to foreign mission without necessarily renouncing their diocesan status, the MSP General Assembly of 1991 approved the proposal to create a committee and empowered that committee to make a study regarding this

provision. In that same year a program was designed and approved by the MSP Council. The late Father Benjie Pelias, MSP, was appointed the first MSP Associate Program Director.

Admission Procedures. The Mission Society of the Philippines welcomes any Filipino diocesan Catholic priest from any diocese/archdiocese of the Philippine archipelago, who has a great love and enthusiasm for missionary work in a foreign land.

The prerequisites for admission are: (1) Positive recommendation letter from applicant's Ordinary; (2) Written certification of good moral standing among the local clergy; (3) At least five years of experience in pastoral care in his home diocese; and, (4) Medical certificate attesting to the physical fitness of the applicant; such certificate shall be duly authenticated by the MSP physician.

The Mission Society of the Philippines reserves the inalienable right to accept and approve or reject and deny any applicant for reasons the Society authorities may deem reasonable and fair.

Formation Process. There are several phases in the process of formation: (1) The priest-applicant shall submit himself to different stages of formation/orientation within a period covering six full months. This orientation period aims to give the priest-applicant the chance to imbibe the MSP spirituality and charism and the opportunity for him to be more at home with the MSP clergy community. (2) The Father Director of the Associate Program shall spell out the procedure and manner of this six-month formation period in detail. (3) Any new MSP Associate should undergo an intensive course on the MSP Constitution and Directory. This course is part of the six-month formation period.

Additional steps are: (4) The Father Director of the MSP Associate Priest Program shall regularly look into the welfare and concerns of the associate member in the foreign missions and those in the six-month formation period. All MSP Associate Members shall be under the care and supervision of the Father Director. (5) Every MSP Associate is enjoined to avail of the regular MSP clergy retreats,



recollections and/or any activities that enhance and promote brotherhood among the missionaries. (6) The mission assignment should in no way be given before the end the six-month orientation period. (7) Immediately after the six-month formation period, there shall be a formal acceptance ceremony by the clergy community and an Oath of Loyalty to the MSP ideals by the new associate member. The mission assignment shall then be announced during the ceremony. Welcome to the MSP Associate Program!

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