Columns
Ministry



Francia, left, and Sister Arabella look at bottles of pain relievers, part of Francia's income-generating project on Sept. 2, 2023. Francia's house in Paco, Manila, Philippines, accommodates only two people. (Jerahmeel Cruz)



by Arabella Balingao

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

January 9, 2024

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

As one of the community development workers of the Good Shepherd Welcome House, I have had occasions to be with the women in Paco, a subdivision of Metro Manila, one of the most congested cities in the National Capital Region of the Philippines. We listen to the women's stories, dialogue with them and offer training and formation.

This organized women's group in Paco participated in a Good Shepherd International Foundation development project this past year. The foundation has been a wonderful resource for our Good Shepherd Welcome House efforts to offer programs and services for the women and children here in Paco, particularly those wounded by life's circumstances and marginalized due to poverty. We received a grant for women's empowerment through them.



Sister Arabella, visiting mothers and women in their homes, heads toward Recy's house, just a few steps to her left, on Sept. 2, 2023, in Paco, Manila, Philippines. (Jerahmeel Cruz)

The majority of the women in the program reside in poor housing, have unstable jobs and little education, and suffer from poor health. Many of the families live in a one-room house the same size as one-vehicle parking space, where privacy is lacking. In such a case, the women and children are prone to abuse and exploitation.

Having in mind our mission of mercy and reconciliation and the 2021 Congregational Chapter's theme, "Drawn by Love, Passionate for Justice," we provide the women opportunities for capacity development through consciousness-raising; skills training; spiritual, social and psychological formation; and paralegal training for the promotion and protection of their rights.

Our goal is that this formation and training will help the women and children of this region move toward future sustainability.

In one of my visits to the Paco area, Francia, 55, showed me her income-generating project of buying and selling ointment for massage and pain relievers. She said, "I want to help my husband earn a living so our family will have three meals for the day."

Asked why she chose this kind of business, she said, "It's true, I earn very little from this, but I like to help those who are sick, and since I know how to massage, I can also offer massage therapy."

Advertisement

Further, she said that after attending formation sessions and training, she came to know that "even if I am poor, I can still help others through the gift God gave me."

She wishes to continue with the Good Shepherd program, where she also experiences changes on her outlook in life. In her own words, "*Mas magaan dalhin ngayon ang problema kaysa noong wala pa ako sa RGS*." ("It is lighter to carry problems now with the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd than when I was not yet with them.")

Recy, 53, another one of the program participants of the grant, expressed her sincere gratitude to the Good Shepherd International Foundation and the sisters for the opportunity to "make life better."

She was able to organize a rice vending income-generating project, which helps meet the needs of the family, no matter how meager the income. This project is about reselling the rice in smaller quantities with a little markup as her profit.

Beyond meeting the needs of the family, Recy recognized how she was helped to become more reflective and analytical.



On Sept. 2, 2023, in Paco, Manila, Philippines, Sister Arabella and Recy discuss the progress of Recy's income-generating project in her small house, which is also the place where she sells her rice. (Jerahmeel Cruz)

Recy believes what brought about the change she noticed in herself were the formation sessions and trainings she participated in. Being chosen as a program participant of the Good Shepherd International Foundation is an affirmation of her worth and dignity.

Her hope now is for other women in the community to have the same opportunity and, together, they will help one another form a support group for those women and children experiencing difficulties in life.

After every visit, dialogue and encounter with the women, particularly the recent ones with Francia and Recy, I come home having mixed feelings. One of gratitude because of the inspiration I received from their life experiences, but also feeling challenged and disturbed. I realize how much they deserve to live a decent life, and yet they face difficulties even as good and hard-working people.

Journeying with them in their difficult situations, I noticed myself entertaining thoughts about how easy it can be to equate success with financial prosperity. Yet these women, although they toil diligently and experience success, do not always gain financial prosperity.

At times, I feel helpless seeing the gap as the poor grow poorer while the rich grow wealthier. Deep inside, I know that true happiness and genuine peace do not originate from worldly riches but from a profound connection with God and a life that aligns with his divine will.



From left: Sister Jane, Sister Arabella, Recy and Francia on the streets in Paco, Manila, Philippines, on Sept. 2, 2023 (Jerahmeel Cruz)

If there is one precious gift I received from accompanying the women in their situation, it is the recognition that spiritual wealth is indeed more enduring. Through their experiences of economic poverty, hunger and suffering, Francia, Recy and the other women show me that these are conditions that can help me rely completely on God. They said that in times of need and vulnerability, they just have to turn to God for strength, consolation and sustenance.

In other words, these women are witnesses to me that God is our only refuge and hope. God's blessings are not confined to external circumstances or material things. God bestows his blessings on us in various ways, and it is up to us to recognize and appreciate these graces.

Truly, I am learning from them to be humble enough to be taught not to be self-sufficient, complacent and disconnected from the suffering of others.

It is my mission to mirror the love, compassion and generosity exemplified by Jesus, Good Shepherd, and to show that our relationship with God is above all else. What good are abundant riches if they make us unhappy and worry unnecessarily about an uncertain future?

I pray that our hearts remain firmly centered on Christ, who offers us genuine prosperity, enduring comfort, fulfillment and joy, so that we may claim what St. John in his Gospel said: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10).