



Provincialate : 4A Chestnut Drive, Singapore 679330.

Tel: 67602461

website: www.chij-sisters.org

Sr Neriza's Mission in the Philippines

Sr's involvement at Galilee Centre in Jalan Kayu in Singapore and life in Nigeria prepared Sr for her mission back home in the Philippines.

A Call to return home to the Philippines

Sr's present mission is in a little village called Cogeo in Antipolo, Philippines.

It was in 2010 that she discerned God's call to return as a native missionary to serve her people in the Philippines. She had been away for several years serving God in his people in Hong Kong, Singapore and Nigeria.

The re-entry to her homeland was indeed very challenging. Society has changed and so has the Philippines. It is still changing to respond to world trends and developments. Sr had to learn to adapt to her people and country.

Sr was trained in Montessori and Teacher Training but in the Philippines, one needed to get a licentiate for teachers to work in the Philippines. After years of active ministry like overseeing the growth and development of a school for the children in Nigeria, it was no easy task to start studying again. Sr managed to pass the exam for the licentiate at the first try.

After getting her licentiate, she was open to let God send her to a place where she can serve in the Philippines. After three months of visiting parishes and schools and speaking with the relevant people, God directed her to a parish in the small village of Cogeo in Antipolo City. The church is named "The Infant Jesus of Prague" as the people there have a great devotion to the Infant Jesus of Prague. The parish priest and the catechists welcomed her as she was the first sister in the parish and in Cogeo.

On July 4, 2010, together with the catechists, Sr was commissioned to serve the parish as a teacher of religion in the schools in the district, a pastoral worker and a spiritual director of the faith formation of the laity.

Sr first stayed at the Charles Borromeo Convent in Manila. Travelling daily to Cogeo was very time-consuming especially during the rainy season. After much prayer and discernment with her Provincial, Sr rented a small room in Cogeo. The parishioners welcomed Sr and they have a support in the mission Sr is involved in.

Sr taught catechism and formed the children in values in public schools. Each class has 80 to 100 children and a Primary school has an average of 7000 or 8000 children. The children were receptive to Sr's teaching.

Though Sr is the only IJ sister in the Philippines, she is supported by her IJ sisters, lay partners and benefactors in her Singapore Province where she belonged and her new and extended community of lay people in Cogeo.

Sr has complete trust in God. The words of our founder, Blessed Nicolas Barre - "*God's excessive love is our only security*" and "*Whatever happens, be always at peace and trust in God*" have always been an inspiration and given Sr courage when she meets with difficult challenges.



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In Jan 2012, Sr joined a team of health personnel (doctors, nurses, midwives) and social service providers. Sr's task is to help in the spiritual nourishment of the indigenous families at the margins of society. (most of them are typhoon victims, the urban poor and the informal settlers). The adults and children are as eager to learn values and the Catholic faith. The whole community spend time praying and singing hymns and songs, followed by fellowship with some snacks.

Many other children and their parents have asked to join the weekly gathering. Sr is happy to contribute to the character development and faith formation of the community. The youth are also interested in what the team is doing.

Within two years, Sr can see the mustard seed growing in the little ones. The children are happy spending time with God in prayer and practise small acts of kindness expressed in their thoughtfulness and generosity with each other. The other committed team members provide the children with some food, and see to their health and medical needs, especially during the vulnerable years of their growth. Walking along with both the team members and the children have kept the spirit alive in Sr's heart.

With the overwhelming response from both the children and their parents, the team recognised that the group ought to be given a name. The inspiration to call them "The Little Ones of the Infant Jesus" will continue to remind the team to help them and the children grow and develop in the image and likeness of God.

The IJ mission is to present Jesus as a saviour to all people. Education is necessary to bring the Gospel values to the children, appreciating that each child is precious and unique in God's eyes.

Sr now has a small centre where the poor children can pray, play and learn. The children are developed holistically especially in academic areas where they are weak.

Every day Sr and her team visit 6 different villages with the same goal to provide for the families in need and to provide character development and faith formation to the children

Sr and her team are aware that the children need help in their studies. The mothers need a place to come together to share and support each other and be self-reliant. One member of the team, Dr Olive, has kindly offered her garage to be used for the education and formation of the children every Thursday. On weekends the parents come with their children after mass to Dr Olive's place.

Sr meets with the lay groups regularly to break the Word and share the faith and love of God while the children have their values and faith formation studies.

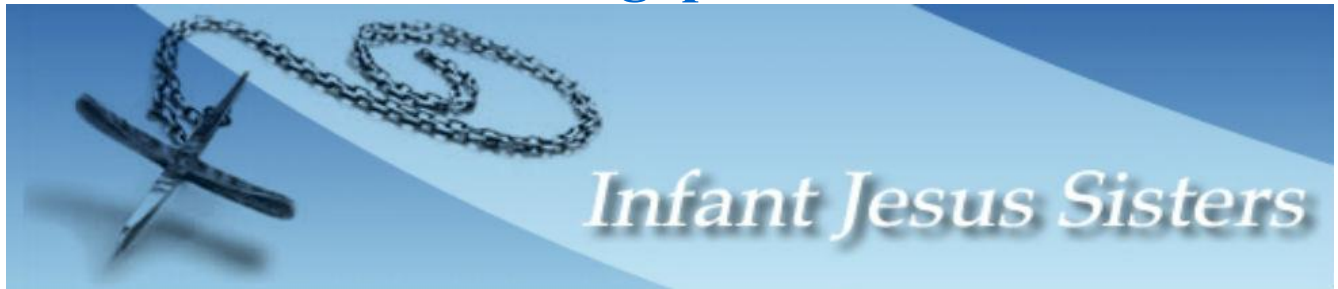
As more children request to be included in the group, and mothers asking for a place to come together for their faith formation, share the Word of God and pick up skills to be self-reliant.

Every Sunday the children look forward to come together to pray, learn, bond, sing, dance and celebrate life. Many of them will linger a little bit longer creating joyful bonding and laughter. Dr Olive's garage is no longer the space for the car but home for the "Little Ones".

With the realisation that many children go to school without breakfast, it was decided that the children be provided with a simple meal, eggs twice a week, when they come for help in their studies at Sr's place.

Thus, from 2016, Sr Neriza's home has become a multi-purpose place - classroom, prayer room, meeting room, place for meals and playground for these lovable children eager to fulfil their dreams.

In 2017, despite the limited space, Sr accepted twenty-six children, eleven of them for the morning session and fifteen for afternoon classes, to coach them in their studies. At the end of the year, remarkable



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results were achieved. The children were more positive in their behaviour and became more hardworking, giving priority to their studies. They have developed self-confidence and even performed for the public.

The house becomes the study area from nine in the morning to three in the afternoon. There are four adults running this tutorial programme. Two mothers have volunteered to be in charge of the food and two volunteer teachers assist the children in their academic studies.

Sr's priorities are directed towards developing study habits, working projects and completion of assignments. Values like self-discipline, respect for each other and self-confidence are instilled. The children are helped to develop their skills and take up responsibilities. A timetable has been drawn up to guide their daily work. There is time to play, to exercise their creativity and patience. This would help them develop teamwork, working and sharing with others. Recognising their potential talents and providing adequate help contributes a lot to a responsive child. Thus, the integrative components of having a good meal, supervised studies and prayers have helped a child grow more holistically.

Now, Sr Neriza, together with a team of volunteers, manages the IJ Centre. Sr has three sessions from morning to night taking in a minimum of 30 pupils each day. On weekends, she reaches out to another 30 pupils and she has a gathering of mothers too. With the provision of food at the IJ Centre, and the self-disciplined and self-directed learning approach, Sr has seen an improvement in the children's focus, studies, self-esteem and self-confidence. With help from Sr and the volunteer teachers, one of the students topped the class. Another was third, yet another fourth and sixth in their respective classes. Given the right support, the children can achieve.

Young adults who are equally passionate to want to make a difference in the lives of the children and youth, offer their time, skills and experience. A few of the children and youth, now young adults, who have passed through the portals of the IJ Centre and have now graduated, are coming back to help the children and youth in the Centre.

Sr Neriza continues to meet the Mothers' group on a weekly basis.

In addition, many opportunities in the form of activities are offered and at times, the suggestions come from the children and young people themselves. These include learning how to use the computers and access the internet for e-learning and communication, community building activities, and learning creativity and team work through games. Some have learnt to play the guitar, sing, dance and are involved in drama, health and nutrition awareness sessions to help them develop a positive attitude towards life, gratitude and resilience as they face challenges in life. Imparting Moral and Spiritual values is an important component as this will help them find their moral compass and spiritual anchor in their lives.

The IJ Centre has become a sanctuary for all who come. The children feel they are loved and welcomed.

Covid Times

The COVID-19 Pandemic has affected all sectors of society and caused massive global suffering.

In the Philippines, poor families are suffering. When the breadwinners do not work, there is no income. The longer the lockdown, hunger becomes the worst enemy of the poor.

Day by day, people knock on Sr Neriza's door asking for food. Their children are hungry. The children come too with these heart-wrenching words, "*Sister, we will not die of Covid-19 but we will die of hunger. Sister, we are hungry.*"



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Hearing their cries and feeling so much for the children and their families, Sr requested help from Singapore. Support from the Infant Jesus Sisters, the lay partners and friends came almost immediately, in the form of funds to buy rice, eggs and vegetables for each of the 100 families that would help sustain them during the lockdown. The gratitude of the recipients to the generous donors testifies that God will never abandon his people.

GENEROSITY BREEDS GENEROSITY

The Covid-19 pandemic may have its deadly effect but, in some situations, it has its creative power. Now that the pandemic has eased, we have embarked on a transformative journey to recovery.

The community spirit becomes alive during these difficult times. We still hear the people's cries of helplessness. We have tried to alleviate the pangs of hunger in those families who really need it most. It is heartening to note that in spite of the little they have, these families were willing to share with their neighbours who have less.

BIG CHALLENGES FOR ACADEMIC RECOVERY

Getting an education during this time is challenging enough. Our country has just resumed face to face classes. The first day of school, after a long lockdown, was a day of excitement, hope and possibilities. It is a long road to recovery to reclaim the loss of lessons.

The cramped homes are hardly conducive to learning. The students are disadvantaged in having no access to the internet and computers to aid them in their home-based learning.

With easing pandemic restrictions, opening our IJ learning centre to the children and youth meant that they would have a nutritious and balanced meal cooked by the mother volunteers, have access to computers and the internet to do their assignments and enjoy opportunities for learning, social interaction and spiritual growth. For the children, the IJ learning centre is a haven and a home away from home where they feel welcomed and loved.

The joy of giving has empowered each one. Love in our hearts for the little ones makes her day complete. Some of the older youth, now high school and university students, who had benefitted from the help in the centre, come back to coach the younger children. The centre has become alive with the children's laughter and that makes life worth living!

WHEN MOTHERS ARE ROLE MODELS

It is not enough to teach the children. Sr felt the call to journey with the mothers. Together with the Parish Social Service Team, she gave formation classes to the mothers. Seventeen of them made it. As they walk together in life, they discover and learn from one another.

The mothers have grown in their relationship with God and become committed parishioners. These are the mothers who had little in life, struggling to live each day, yet, they have offered their service voluntarily in the parish for almost ten years. Prominent church members noticed this group of women maintaining the church cleanliness and ensuring that health measures are met so that the parishioners can safely return to church for mass and devotions.

The Parish Priest recognises and appreciates their invaluable contribution to the church. He exclaims, "When poor people offer their services, it is out of love!" The mothers truly exemplify the spirit of self-giving, worthy of emulation.

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With gratitude in their hearts, the mothers, the children and the youth shared, "We have experienced God's love and His manifold blessings especially through the generosity, support and kindness of Sr Neriza, the IJ sisters, their lay partners and benefactors in Singapore. They have been a source of strength for us and shared generously with us and we are truly grateful. Though we have nothing, it does not stop us from wanting to give back to God and the people."

In her little way, Sr and her team have become beacons of hope and encouragement to those underprivileged families in the community.

A Home is where the Heart is. Sr's place is a centre fully open to welcome the little ones. It is a Home where transformation takes place.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY!

Shared by Sr Neriza IJS attached to the Singapore Province serving her people in the Philippines.

"Whatever happens remain always at peace and trust the Lord." – Blessed Nicolas Barre



Children at their studies



Children using the computers



Recreation time



Sr with the adults receiving their parcels of food

Contact:

To communicate with the IJ Sisters about Sr Neriza and her mission, kindly email us at ljssisters.sg@gmail.com

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