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ACCOMPANYING AND JOURNEYING WITH OVERSEAS FILIPINOS IN ITALY

Context of Filipino Migration into Italy

ISTAT (2011) data show that the total number of foreigners in Italy is close to five million or about eight percent of the total population. Out of the five million, an estimated 123,584 Filipinos currently live and work in Italy as of 2010 (ISTAT, 2011), constituting some 2.9 percent of the total population of foreigners in the country and the sixth largest foreign community after the Romanians, Albanians, Moroccans, Chinese and Ukrainians.

Filipinos were among the first migrant groups to come to seek work in Italy, starting in the late 1970s and 80s. They are mainly employed in the domestic or family care sector as caregivers and domestic helpers. Given the employment opportunities in this sector and the fact that women take up these jobs, it is not surprising that close to 60 percent of the Filipinos in the country are women.



Just in the last five years, from 2005 to 2010, there has been a 50 percent increase in the number of Filipinos (Wikipedia. it) who have come to Italy. It is expected that this number will continue to grow given the new openings to bring in direct hires from the Philippines as well as from other countries and the Italian family reunification programme that allows migrant parents to bring over their children up to the age of 18 years.

The increase in the Filipino birth rate in Italy is also contributing to the growing Filipino population in the country. In 2008, 1,598 Filipino babies were born, indicating a 14.6 percent increase from the previous year. It is likely that in the future, the number of Filipino migrants into Italy will continue to grow, not only because of the pull factors of higher salaries that can be earned and the presence of family members who arrived earlier, but the push factor of the lack of well-paying jobs in the Philippines that can support the basic and other needs of family members, such as university education, housing, medical care, etc.

While the official government statistics show over 120,000 Filipinos legally living in Italy, it is difficult to estimate the number of irregular or undocumented Filipinos who entered the country earlier as tourists who stayed on and/or were trafficked into the country by recruitment agencies that often unscrupulously prey on and take advantage of would-be migrant workers. Compared to the trafficking of migrants into other countries and of other nationalities, however, Filipinos in Italy have not suffered as much. The Italian Government, aware of Italy's need for migrant labour to work on farms and in factories and other work which many native Italians are reluctant to do, has actually instituted several amnesty programmes for undocumented or irregular migrants so that they can live and work in the country legally. The first of such amnesties was instituted in the late 1980s. And the various *decreti flussi* of recent years serve to control the flow of migrants into the country, although the influx of migrants especially from North Africa and the Middle East has not abated, especially with the recent political and civil unrest and violence in the Arab world.

The Italian Social Security and Pension System is now becoming increasingly problematic, because of the decrease in the working population of native Italians contributing to the system and the aging population who rely on the Social Security can only be propped up by the contributions of migrant labour. Of the so-called 'new' Italians, or the migrant population, that now constitute some five million, two million are employed and contribute about 11 percent of the Italian gross domestic product (GDP), and pay taxes amounting to about € 33 billion. The 3.5 percent of the companies that migrants own and operate pay some € 7.5 billion of the country's social security (*Caritas Migrantes 2010 — Dossier Sull' Immigrazione*).

The Filipino migrant workers in Italy continue to bring their family members or neighbours into Italy despite the sometimes huge sums needed to do so, costing as much as several thousand dollars. Many of these

family members are spouses and children who come under the family reunification programme. In 2008, about 16 percent of Filipinos came to the country to join their families compared to almost 79 percent who came for employment (Colombo and Martini, 2010). A recent study showed that in 2008, 83,589 residence permits for Filipinos were issued by the Italian Ministry for the Interior, of which 65,000 were for work reasons (ISTAT, 2008). About 99 percent of these residence permits were issued for “subordinate work” (ERCOF, 2009).

Gains and Challenges of the Filipino Community in Italy

That the overseas Filipino workers, or OFWs, in Italy have been able to improve their incomes as well as their families' economic conditions in the Philippines cannot be disputed. It is no small matter that Filipinos in Italy are among the highest migrant remittance senders compared to other migrant nationalities. For the years 2004-2007, Filipinos were the third largest senders of remittances after the Chinese and Romanians. When it came to *per capita* remittances, Filipinos came second highest, second to the Chinese (ERCOF, 2010).

These remittances have generally been spent to send children to school, including private schools and universities, to build houses, as well as for the basic needs of family members, such as medical care and emergencies. A few have been able to start small businesses and invest their savings. Many OFWs however, prior to coming to Italy had to borrow considerable amounts to finance their travel and placement costs, at times mortgaging properties to do so. The income of the first few years is thus spent on repaying these loans.

However these remittances have not been entirely positive as they have tended to create a culture of dependence for family members back in the Philippines who view this money as a never-ending flow of resources from their relatives abroad to finance not only their consumption requirements but also their rising penchant for luxuries. Parents who leave their children behind in the Philippines suffer from a guilt complex for their physical distance and absence which they make up for by buying almost everything that their children request such as the latest gadgets, clothes, toys, etc. The members of the family who are left behind, although capable of working, feel no strong compulsion to look for work if their needs are taken care of by their OFW relatives. In time, they succumb to a life of dependence on the monthly remittances from abroad. Meantime, the OFWs constantly complain of the stress and hardship they experience in their jobs in order to meet the continuing demand for funds and remittances from family members. Growing numbers of Filipinos who came in the first waves of labour migration in the 1980s and are now approaching retirement or have actually reached retirement cannot stop working completely because they have to meet the needs of their children or even grandchildren. Many were not able to save or invest enough of their earnings to retire to a comfortable lifestyle in the Philippines, and certainly not in Italy.ⁱⁱ

It is not only the family members left in the Philippines whose values appear to have been negatively influenced by the onset of overseas migration and the culture of dependence on remittances from labour migration. In Italy too, couples as well as parents, feeling the pressure and the attraction of earning more, take on as many jobs as they can, even if it means no holidays, not even Sundays or days off. It is not uncommon for parents to actually neglect their children or at least to trade off important quality and quantity time with their children for overtime or extra work. Thus it is not surprising that many children, particularly those who were raised in the Philippines and came to Italy at an older age, do not easily form strong bonds with their parents. In fact, children tend to rebel against their parents who feel they have neglected them and do not really care for them. Findings from a study in 2010 on Filipino children who reunited with their families in Italy confirm other migrant studies elsewhere that show the emotional difficulties migrant children face as indicated by communication problems and the lack of closeness to their absentee parents (Liamzon, 2010).

Other Social Costs of Migration

The reality of the two aspects of migration is something that is not fully understood nor seriously considered either by the Philippine Government or the migrant worker in Italy and his/her family in the Philippines. The positive effects of migration and its contribution to the Philippine economy as described in the previous section are offset by the negative consequences on families.

Couples too experience tremendous strains and challenges in their relationships especially spouses who are physically separated for years at a time. Issues of infidelity, both one-off or more usually, permanent relationships formed either by a spouse left behind in the Philippines or the one in Italy, have caused serious break-ups in marriages and the fragmentation of families. This sociological phenomenon and the consequence on the children have yet to be really studied.

However, it is the Filipino children and youth, either born and/or raised in Italy and those brought to Italy at an older age who tend to suffer the most or for whom migration has been at a higher social cost.

The emotional and identity issues that young people have to grapple and contend with as they go through puberty and young adulthood are compounded with being migrants in a foreign country with a vastly different language and culture. As found in other studies, not only among Filipino migrant youth but migrant youth in general, cultural integration is much more difficult to achieve if the children are unable to master the language of the host country and fully integrate into the school system. Thus, as to be expected, Filipino children born and raised in Italy, going through the Italian school system, have minimal problems with integrating into Italian society. In fact, they become in many ways, as Italian as any native Italian children, taking on many of their values, culture and habits. At times, this can cause considerable clashes, anxiety and disappointment for Filipino parents, raised in the Filipino culture and traditions who consider Italian children and youth as too 'fresh' or disrespectful of parents, etc. The great problem is how to achieve a good balance between inculcating what is best in the Italian culture and preserving as well what is best in Philippine culture.

For the children and youth who were not raised in Italy but only came to the country in their teens and been formed primarily in the Philippines, studying under the Philippine educational system, the challenges are very different. In terms of their integration into Italian society theirs is the more difficult hurdle. The lack of Italian language skills presents the first of many issues they have to confront in coping and surviving in the Italian school system which is closely linked to language proficiency. Liamzon's preliminary study (2010) on these youth show that the lack of adequate grounding in speaking and understanding the Italian language as well as socio-psychological preparation greatly impede the migrant youth's capacity to cope with school and to socialize with the Italian students. The problem of bullying in schools thus becomes more serious. The tendency is for these youths is to stick to their own sort or to other migrant youth.

Studies show that many migrant youth, including Filipino youth who have difficulty in school tend to drop out resulting in a downward spiral in their integration process. Some are pressured by parents to look for employment in as much as they no longer want to continue their education in Italian schools. Thus, many are likely to end up in the future in similar dead-end jobs as their parents. Quite a few fall into dysfunctional forms of behaviour such as drug abuse and teen-age sex. Still others are pushed into 'gangs' and 'fraternities' as a way to find peer acceptance and bonding.

Another hidden but equally disconcerting issue is the lack of an impelling vision and ambition of the youth themselves in their host country or back in the Philippines that can serve as the motivating factor to make them resilient and determined to pursue an ideal. Without vision and any possibility of change and opportunities, it is difficult to see how the youth can improve their status in the host country, especially with minimal support and encouragement from their parents and other institutions that can make a difference in their lives.

Moreover, it is not only the youth who suffer or experience this lack of direction and vision; OFWs armed with college degrees and substantive employment experiences in semi-professional or professional jobs (as teachers, principals, supervisors, government employees, etc..) discover that it is difficult to find work other than family care services. Discouraged and constantly hearing from other Filipinos that these are the only openings, they become resigned to getting old and stuck in their jobs and comfort themselves that at least they have their pensions to look forward to. Despite new information that there are other employment opportunities if one were to enroll for upgrading courses or obtain more language proficiency, a large majority, especially those who have been in the country for many years, have become apathetic and disheartened.

The Role of the Filipino Church in Accompanying Migrant Filipinos and their Families

It has been observed by the religious and civil authorities in Italy that Filipinos are among the more organized, if not the best organized among the migrant communities in the country. In big cities particularly, Filipino Catholic communities are almost always present, organizing regular Sunday masses and religious celebrations, Bible study groups, and various kinds of devotions. These communities also function as social networks, often geographically linked, of migrants and their families. Different social activities, including get-togethers, fiestas for all occasions are held immediately following the observance of the Sunday masses as well as serving as a means to collect funds to assist members who may need emergency financial assistance or even for contributions to send back to the Philippines in cases of disasters or to support local projects such as scholarships for needy students.

In Rome, Pope John Paul II gave the Sta. Pudenziana Church to the Sentro Pilipino Chaplaincy in 1991 and a formal parish for the Filipino migrants was established under the Diocese of Rome. The Sentro Pilipino Chaplaincy turns 20 years old this year and currently brings together some 45 Filipino Catholic communities all over the city with membership ranging from 20 to a few hundred. In Milan, there are four Catholic communities that regularly worship and celebrate together. In many other cities in the country, a chaplain or visiting priest serves the large numbers of Filipino Catholics but most of the priest's involvement with the communities focuses on the sacramental needs of the faithful because of the limited availability and time that the priest or chaplain can give to the other pastoral needs of the faithful. Exceptions to this are Rome or Milan which have relatively more pastoral staff. In Rome, it is fortunate that there are many Filipino priests and nuns studying in the many Pontifical Universities who are able to volunteer to assist the migrants particularly in sacramental-related activities.

The Sentro Pilipino Chaplaincy implements a wide range of services and programmes for the Filipinos in Rome including job placement, Italian language classes for beginners, Catechism preparation for the sacraments of Confirmation, the Holy Eucharist and Matrimony.

In 2006, the then chaplain deemed it important to extend the Chaplaincy's outreach and services to the Filipino communities by forming the Family Ministry under the Commission on Youth and Family. This was done after a small study was completed on the situation of the Filipino youth in Rome as a joint activity of the chaplaincy and an NGO, the Associazione Pilipinas OFSPES (Overseas Filipinos Society for the Promotion of Economic Security). The study organized focus group discussions with separate sessions for parents and for youth and explored the issues and concerns among Filipino youth, particularly those in their teenage years, as discussed in the previous section (Liamzon, 2006).

The Family Ministry was formally set up with the goal to help relationships within families and among family members, whether spouses or parents and children. With many problems among Filipino youth or between spouses or between parents and their children becoming common and widespread, one of the first programmes the FM developed was a counselling programme.

Specifically, a Hopeline (telephone counselling) was started in late 2006 with the help of several religious nuns and some lay pastoral workers to give counselling services (or more basically, a sympathetic ear) to those experiencing emotional and psychological problems. This eventually led to collaboration with the UGAT Foundation, a Jesuit Apostolate in the Philippines offering counselling services to poor and migrant families. The director of UGAT, a professor at the Psychology Department of the Ateneo University in Manila, is assisting the FM to enhance the capacities of our counseling volunteers as well as to orient Filipino communities on understanding the role of family ministries in their own communities. Several short training sessions have been held for volunteers and starting in June 2011, a one-year certificate programme on counselling for Filipino migrant families will be conducted (using internet technologies as well as actual face-to-face sessions) as a collaborative programme of the Family Ministry, UGAT and the Ateneo University.

To prepare engaged couples for marriage, an 8-session Pre-Cana programme was drawn up using the materials from the Archdiocese of Rome translated and adapted for Filipino couples. The sessions are given by members of the FM, with resource persons from a Filipino lay Catholic movement with chapters in different parts of the world. The Post-Cana/Marriage Enhancement seminars with the formation of a Marriage Support Group are designed to help already-married couples living in Rome. Single people (separated from their spouses by distance or emotionally, widowed or by choice) also have a monthly Singles' Support Group seminar.

Together with the Youth Ministry under the Commission on Youth and Family, the FM also organizes Parent-Youth Dialogues which aim to enable the children, particularly teen-agers or those who grew up in the Philippines without their parents to share and voice their feelings to their parents. The aim of these dialogues is to reestablish better communication between parents and children, a rather difficult task given the lack of time and skills especially on the part of the parents for open and true communication and dialogue.

A home visitation programme by the FM members among Filipino families to pray together as well as provide opportunities to share their issues and concerns within the family was initiated in 2007 but has only been implemented intermittently due to competing priorities. For a year, in 2008, a spiritual direction program was given to FM members and the religious linked with Hopeline to strengthen the spirituality of the ministry's core of volunteers.

Assessing the Family Ministry Programmes and Services and Looking Ahead

How successful these various programmes have been has not yet been systematically assessed. Often and especially in the early years of the CYF and the FM, the work has not been particularly encouraging. The attempts to recruit members for the FM to volunteer to work at the chaplaincy level to serve the communities in their own family ministries, to convince people to attend (or organize) or avail themselves of the services and programmes being offered have not yielded the numbers hoped for and envisioned. There have been many disappointments, even frustration when trying to reach out to the Catholic Filipinos in Rome who seem more concerned with their regular Sunday masses coupled with the regular birthday, anniversary, and other celebrations which leave little time for attending to socio-psychological-emotional needs and growth of members and others.

An additional formation programme for pastoral workers was initiated in 2010, this time to strengthen the knowledge and understanding the basic Catechism and on what it means to take on leadership roles in the different Filipino Catholic communities. This formation programme has two tracks: the Catechism part given by the priests and nuns studying in Rome and the leadership track given by trainers from another unit of the Ateneo University, the Ateneo School of Government (ASoG). From September 2010 to May 2011, the course was held two Sunday afternoons a month covering such topics as the important tenets of the Old and New Testaments, the sacraments, from what it means to be a servant leader, conflict management and negotiations to public speaking. All these are planned to assist pastoral volunteers to become more effective leaders and facilitators of their communities and groups, as well as to deepen their capacity to become good catechists.

NGO-Initiated and A Multi-stakeholder Approach to Empowering Migrants

Changing mind-sets
Building skills
Developing networks
Articulating dreams
Transforming lives....

These are the goals envisioned by one NGO, the Associazione Pilipinas OFSPES, in organizing a training course or actually an empowerment programme for Filipino migrant workers in Italy, in collaboration with the Ateneo University School of Government (ASoG) and three government institutions: the Philippine Embassy to Italy, the Philippine Overseas Labour Office (POLO) and the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA). The programme is called the Leadership and Social Entrepreneurship Training which aside from leadership and social *entrepreneurship* also includes financial literacy or education. The programme has planned 12 sessions over a six-month period, with two Sundays per month.

OFSPES Inc. registered in the Philippines also collaborates and provides support services through its representative in Italy. OFSPES stands for the Overseas Filipinos' Society for the Promotion of Economic Security. It plays on the Latin word '*spes*' which means hope.

The training programme, building on the Youth Leadership and Social Entrepreneurship Course given by the ASoG, aims to develop a new breed and generation of Filipino migrant leaders as well as of social *entrepreneurs* who could make a positive difference to themselves, to their families as well as serving the Filipino and other migrant communities in Italy.

The first LSE training was launched in Rome in April 2008 with 51 trainees, 37 of whom graduated in April 2009. As a result of the one-year training and mentoring, graduates have developed social enterprise plans and have gained new leadership and financial literacy skills that equip them to build or expand their leadership roles in the Filipino community. The second phase of the LSE1 involving the implementation of business plans by the graduates started in July 2009. Since then, with the success in empowering the first groups of LSE trainees in Rome, the organizers have expanded the training to other OFWs in other cities in Italy, with a shorter six month programme. As of April 2011, three programmes have been conducted in Rome, one in Naples and another in Milan with a total of 180 graduates from all five programmes. Four additional programmes are planned for 2011 and 2012 in Florence, Turin, Milan and Rome.

The Outcome and Impact of the LSE

The financial literacy sessions have had the biggest immediate impact in terms of change in lifestyle of both the graduates and their families encouraging graduates to communicate what they have learned to family members, especially back in the Philippines, particularly about the need to budget and save and to draw up financial goals

and to invest savings. Many graduates speak of having finally plucked up the courage to discuss financial responsibility or in some cases, confront their relatives and say 'no' to the numerous financial demands placed on them.

Several graduates have started to implement their social enterprise plans, including producing a magazine, facilitating financial literacy activities, setting up catering services, savings clubs, as well as playing a more active role in community activities. Some of the younger graduates, after having identified the problem of youth as the one they want to address in their social enterprise, have started in helping the Youth Ministry of the Sentro Pilipino Chaplaincy as facilitators.

Recently, a Questionnaire was sent around by e-mail to the trainees and graduates to obtain their frank assessment on how the LSE has influenced their lives, their families and their communities, if any. The survey returns show very positive feedback from the graduates who have begun to share what they have learned with family members, friends and even with strangers with whom they interact in buses or trains. Many from the previous LSE groups have volunteered and have actively recruited applicants to the other programmes.

Programme Characteristics

The training programme is the first-of-its kind for Filipino migrant workers in the following ways:

- it is a collaborative effort of Government, academia and civil society to help in the empowerment of migrant Filipinos;
- it offers a combination of building essential leadership skills, financial literacy and social *entrepreneurship*, allowing opportunities for OFWs, especially the youth to broaden their outlook, dreams and vision empowering them to pursue these;
- by encouraging Filipino migrant workers to become *entrepreneurs*, especially social *entrepreneurs*, who will be facing various social problems either in host countries or in the Philippines should they plan to return, transforming them into agents of social change;
- the programme aims to challenge the trainees to 'give back' or 'pay forward' from what they have learned thus helping to expand the programme's outreach and sustain the programme's goals and objectives over the long-term.

Programme Elements

- Training modules on servant leadership, financial literacy, social *entrepreneurship* (business planning skills), communication and facilitation, conflict management and negotiation, networking;
- Mentoring and 'hand holding' through various resource persons who serve as mentors to the trainees in developing their leadership skills, enhancing their financial education or in becoming social *entrepreneurs*. The mentors are identified locally as well as in the Philippines;
- Exposure to existing Filipino (and other migrant) businesses and Filipino civil society organizations (CSOs) locally to widen their perspectives and knowledge on *entrepreneurship*.

Conclusion:

The paper has presented two approaches to assisting and accompanying Filipino migrants in Rome: one by the Filipino Catholic Chaplaincy and the other by an NGO both of which we hope are making a difference in the lives of the migrants and their families. The Sentro Pilipino Chaplaincy and the Filipino Catholic communities serve as the mechanisms by which Filipinos can gather as faith communities and allow for the continuation of the Filipino culture and traditions through their faith practices. For those communities that are also taking some part in the Italian parishes, there are some opportunities to share common activities, even if on a rather limited basis. In several churches where Filipinos congregate each Sunday, the presence of Filipinos celebrating the sacraments and actively engaging in some of the Italian parish activities contributes to the life of the Local Church. Nevertheless, much remains to be done to integrate more fully into Italian parishes that would allow for less of the 'ghetto-ization' among the Filipinos who tend to stick together each Sunday, conducting separate Eucharistic celebrations, etc.

It is the hope and aim of the SPCR to provide for the pastoral care of migrant workers in Rome. These much needed programmes and services will address the many psychological, social and economic needs of our Filipino migrants and their families while facilitating their greater integration into Italian life and society.

The secular approach of an NGO such as OFSPES to assist migrants aims to change the mind-set of the migrants so that they can take more active steps to transform their lives socially, economically and politically, in a way taking off from some of the work that the chaplaincy does. The goal remains the same for both – to

accompany and assist in the empowerment of migrant workers so that they in turn can reach out to the many more who need to be reached.

End notes

¹ Migrants in industrial countries tend to be employed in the so-called 3D jobs, i.e., those that are dirty, dangerous and demeaning. These are the jobs that are not done by the natives of the host countries.

² The Sentro Pilipino Chaplaincy Rome with the Associazione Filipinas OFSPES is currently doing a small survey and study on the aging overseas Filipinos in Rome to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the situation of these Filipinos and what might be done to assist them to prepare for retirement either in the Philippines should they decide to return or in Italy if they remain. The study is expected to be finished by the end of May 2011.

A Filipino choir!


