

# Sects and Sin in Manila

By Patrick Madrid

THE SUN IS 93 million miles from the earth, but in the Philippines it feels a lot closer. Never have I experienced heat like the heat I endured in Manila during a week's visit in May. I was there to make preparations for Catholic Answers' evangelization work during Pope John Paul II's visit to World Youth Day '95 in January.

At World Youth Day '93, held in Denver, Catholic Answers distributed 225,000 free copies of its evangelization booklet, *Pillar of Fire, Pillar of Truth*. We hope to give out as many as twice that number--some in English, some in Tagalog--in Manila, where up to a million people are expected to participate in the week-long activities.

***LAX, Monday, 10:00 a.m.***

Two hundred of us were herded aboard the Northwest Airlines 747, and I settled into my seat for the 13-hour flight to Seoul, where, after a two-hour layover, I'd catch my connecting flight to Manila. Catholic apologetics is a no-frills occupation, and I had a no-frills coach-class ticket. I was seated in the no-smoking section, but my seat was close enough to the cigarette crowd that it should have been called the no-inhaling section. For a moment I wondered why my row was empty, even though the rest of the coach seats were occupied. I discovered the reason when I tried to recline the seat--it wouldn't move. In fact, the entire row of seats wouldn't recline because of the bulkhead right behind them. "Oh well," I sighed. "At least I'll be able to lie down later and sleep." But I never could get to sleep, so I sat up straight and read.

***Aquino International Airport,  
Manila, Tuesday, 11:09 p.m.***

I cleared customs quickly--officials waved me through without glancing at my bags--and headed across the concourse toward the exit which, even at that late hour, was jammed with travelers. By the time I exited the terminal I felt like I was

wrapped in a soggy heating blanket--and that was the comfortable part. As I'd learn in a few hours, in the Philippines the evening's heat and humidity are mild compared to the day's.

My Catholic contacts, Rommel and Cocoy Garcia, sons of General Vic Garcia (retired from the Philippine National Police), were waiting for me at the curb in an air-conditioned Toyota. As we drove to their home in Angeles City, 90 minutes north of Manila, I asked lots of questions, and they filled me in on the state of the Church in the Philippines. They told me about the challenges the Catholics face: a government which promotes mass-distribution of contraceptives, a lack of solid Catholic books and tapes, a lack of funds, a lack of priests to minister to the islands' 56 million Catholics, and stiff competition from sects.

During the drive I counted at least a dozen Iglesia ni Cristo churches along the way. (Iglesia ni Cristo is a fast-growing, virulently anti-Catholic sect headquartered near Manila). Rommel and Cocoy were enthusiastic when I explained about Catholic Answers' evangelization efforts planned for Manila. They knew that the distribution of *Pillar of Fire, Pillar of Truth* would give a boost to the Church.

At about 12:30 a.m. I arrived at the home of Hermie and Cen Yusi, a couple active in the local prayer group. They offered to put me up in a spare room of their home for the entire week. I unpacked my bags and headed for the shower. My room had a large fan but no air-conditioner, and though the mercury was past the 90 degree mark, I was too exhausted to care about the heat. I set the fan on high, aimed it at the bed, and fell asleep.

### **Iglesia ni Cristo headquarters, Quezon City, Wednesday, 10:15 a.m.**

I figured that since I was in Manila, I'd take the opportunity to rattle Iglesia ni Cristo's cage and put its leaders on notice that Catholic Answers is coming to town to explain and defend the true faith.

Iglesia teaches that at the Second Coming of Christ all true believers (Iglesia members in good standing) will be "caught up into heaven." But this isn't your usual rapture, according to a widespread and (alas!) probably false rumor. Iglesia members, having received advance warning, are to make their way to the local Iglesia church and await the rapture indoors. The entire building and all its occupants will be lifted up to heaven. This idea may have been inspired by Iglesia architecture: The buildings are aerodynamic, as though designed to fly better in the rapture.

Iglesia ni Cristo's sprawling headquarters reminded me of the Emerald City in the "Wizard of Oz," the difference being that these munchkins were anything but friendly once they found out what organization I represented. After persistent negotiations with the guards at the front gate I managed to wrangle a meeting with Bienvenido Santiago, the editor of Iglesia's monthly magazine, *Pasugo*. I was ushered into his office and shown to a seat. Also present was Samuel Paran, a minister on staff. Santiago handed me his no-nonsense business card. It read: "Bien C. Santiago, Minister of the Gospel."

I think these fellows were a little surprised, perhaps a little miffed, at my persistence in trying to see them, but after I was seated Santiago did his best to put me at ease with his gracious banter.

"So, Mr. Madrid. What do you want?"

"I just dropped by to say howdy, and to tell you that Catholic Answers is sending a team of apologists to Manila for World Youth Day '95 to help out with the Holy Father's visit." He grimaced when I said "Holy Father."

"We are well aware of your pope's visit next year."

"Oh? And do you have special plans to mark the occasion?"

Santiago grinned. "Let us just say that Iglesia ni Cristo will be ready for his visit."

I knew what that meant. Iglesia ni Cristo hates the Catholic Church and attacks its teachings whenever the chance presents itself. Each issue of *Pasugo* is crammed with articles showing how "unbiblical" the Catholic Church is for teaching doctrines such as the Trinity, the divinity and Incarnation of Christ, the Mass, and purgatory. As our chat progressed I gleaned that Iglesia was gearing up for an anti-Catholic proselytization push to coincide with World Youth Day. This push will include open-air preaching by Iglesia personnel, a barrage of anti-Catholic radio broadcasts throughout the Philippine islands, a massive tract distribution effort, and televised broadsides against the pope and the Catholic Church.

We sparred for fifteen minutes or so, and out of the corner of my eye I saw Paran jotting down notes. For all I knew, the whole thing was being videotaped through the two-way mirror behind Santiago's desk, and I was being weighed, measured, and CAT-scanned, all for some sinister use by Iglesia at a later date.

I smiled. "Look, Bien, do you think you Iglesia folks might have an interest in

another debate with Catholic Answers when we're here in January?" Karl Keating had accepted a challenge to debate one of their ministers a few years ago. Held in a high school gym, the debate drew an overflow crowd of 3,500 spectators, most of them Iglesia members bused in from throughout Southern California. No doubt the video tapes of the debate had been studied carefully by Iglesia's high command, which knew all about Catholic Answers.

Santiago smirked. "Why would you want another debate? Are you admitting that your Keating lost the first debate and now you would like a chance to redeem yourself?"

"Oh no, Bien," I smiled even more broadly. "Whatever would give you that impression? Haven't you seen the video of the debate? Keating killed your guy in that debate. We'd like to whip you again."

"That debate was a great victory for Iglesia ni Cristo. Keating lost."

The barbs went back and forth for several minutes, each of us smiling. I left a copy of *Pillar of Fire, Pillar of Truth* and the issue of *This Rock* that contained a cover story about our work in Denver at last year's World Youth Day. We made no agreement about a debate, except to express mutual interest in debating either the divinity of Christ or the papacy.

Outside, I looked back at the odd, streamlined buildings. With ten million members, Iglesia ni Cristo is growing quickly--not just in the Philippines, but among Filipinos in America. Nearly all converts, of course, are former Catholics.

Iglesia ni Cristo, which in its evangelization activity and theology is like the Jehovah's Witnesses, is tenacious in challenging the Catholic Church. Come World Youth Day, even if no other anti-Catholic sects show up to harangue visiting youths, Iglesia alone will pose a stout challenge.

### **Makati, Wednesday, 3:00 p.m.**

I finished a long and beneficial meeting with one of the printers who will produce *Pillar of Fire, Pillar of Truth*. His card gives his name as Felicito Abiva, but everyone calls him Toots. He is president of the Asian Catholic Publishers Consortium and owns Felta Publishing.

Printing as many as 500,000 copies of the booklet in the Philippines will save us thousands. Plus, we'll have them on site and ready for distribution when our evangelization team arrives on January 9, the day before the first scheduled

event.

Toots and I hammered out the details of the project--getting bids from other publishers, determining the booklet's paper and size specifications, figuring out printing and shipping logistics, and, most importantly, agreeing on a price. The booklets will be dropped off by the printers and stored at our hotel and distribution center at Manila's gigantic Rizal Park, the venue for the major World Youth Day events, including the Pope's Masses.

Catholic Answers' headquarters will be at the Hotel Manila, directly across from Rizal Park. From there, and from our main distribution point within the park itself and just across the street, our team will coordinate the efforts of 200 volunteers who will see to it that copies of *Pillar of Fire*, *Pillar of Truth* get into the hands of the visiting young people.

### ***Angeles City, Thursday, 2:15 p.m.***

I had several objectives during my visit, so I had to move quickly. I had to meet with printers, arrange for the translation of the booklet into Tagalog (the Filipino national language) visit Cardinal Jaime Sin and other bishops to acquaint them with Catholic Answers and secure their blessing on our evangelization plans, reconnoiter the World Youth Day sites in Rizal Park, arrange lodging and transportation for our staff, and otherwise make as many contacts as possible. I spent the afternoon drinking coffee in an effort to shake off the jet lag and making phone calls to arrange meetings. Soon I had a full appointment book.

At 8:00 Hermie and I drove through driving rain to a chapel used by the Sacred Heart parish prayer group. The storm had knocked out the power, and as I stood in the darkened doorway of the small building I could see by candlelight the outlines of the fifty people inside, praying and singing.

It was easy to picture this as a scene from second- or third-century Rome, when Catholics had to gather in secret, lest they be rounded up by the authorities. Then another thought intruded: The need for catacombs and clandestine Masses could arise again. Our World Youth Day efforts may be helping to convert and equip the Church's future leaders and martyrs. (I had cause to recall this thought a few days later.)

Hermie introduced me to Fr. Larry, the youthful pastor. Speaking loudly so he could hear me over the crash of the lightning and the steady drone of the rain, I acquainted him with the work of Catholic Answers, explained our plans for World Youth Day, and summed up by asking him to help us organize a cadre of

volunteers to pass out booklets.

He was pleased with the project and promised to help however he could, including by contacting his bishop, Most Rev. Anacleto Aniceto, to seek his support. Mass was about to start, so I said good-bye and gave him copies of *Pillar of Fire*, *Pillar of Truth* and *This Rock*. We shook hands, and I headed into the rain.

### **Angeles City, Friday**

I spent the day talking with other printers, arranging for volunteers, and visiting parishes to get a feel for the level of activity as Catholics prepare for the Pope's visit. What struck me was the profound spirituality of the average Filipino Catholic. Everywhere I went, in all the people I met, I saw a deep and reverent love for Christ and his Church. The people, like Catholics anywhere, were not particularly well-catechized, but they loved the faith. Every church I entered, at any time of the day or night, had dozens of men, women, and children on their knees praying before the Blessed Sacrament.

Still, I was worried by the anti-Catholic challenge. Many Filipino Catholics abandon the faith. You can't walk a block, it seems, without seeing a newly-constructed Iglesia ni Cristo church or Fundamentalist chapel or Kingdom Hall. The Philippines is a Catholic country now, perhaps, but the writing is on the wall, and it's not hard to read: The Philippines won't be Catholic in 25 years unless more is done to combat the spread of heresies.

I was cheered to find that everywhere I went, priests, nuns, bishops, and lay people were enthusiastically supportive of Catholic Answers' plan to blanket World Youth Day with copies of *Pillar of Fire*, *Pillar of Truth*. One delightful young nun beamed at me after thumbing through the booklet. "This is just what we need here! What a great shot in the arm this will be for our young people!"

### **Manila, Saturday, 2:30 p.m.**

I was in the waiting area at the residence of Cardinal Jaime Sin, Archbishop of Manila. This was the only time during the whole week that I wore a suit. Sweat trickled down my back as I sat in a wicker chair and chatted with Sr. Amparo Sanchez, B.V.M., the Cardinal's secretary. She told me the history of the Catholic Church in the Philippines and how, lately, it was experiencing great strain because of the onslaught of the sects.



"That's why I'm here, Sister." I smiled. "Catholic Answers hopes to secure Cardinal Sin's approbation for our evangelization plans."

A seminarian directed me to the second floor of the old building where the Cardinal had his quarters. I stepped into a small, high-ceilinged office, and there was Cardinal Sin, seated behind a modest and book-laden desk (which was cleared off for our photograph).

He spoke with conviction about the need for evangelism and fidelity to the Church. For half an hour we discussed Catholic Answers' work. He was pleased with our efforts and kindly agreed to tape a brief message of greeting to Catholics in the U.S., inviting them to come to Manila for World Youth Day. At the close of our conversation, the Cardinal remarked, "We must not forget all those who have died for the Catholic faith, and we must be willing to live that faith."

### **Aquino International Airport, Tuesday, 9:45 a.m.**

I passed through customs on my way to the terminal where I would catch a flight to Tokyo, and I spotted a young monk standing a few yards away, his back to a gaudy duty-free store that beckoned travelers to make last-minute purchases of jewelry, clothing, and liquor. Bearded, tonsured, and clad in sandals and a rough habit, he was an unassuming witness to the message of the gospel in the face of the sensuality of the world. I thought of Matthew 19:21: "Jesus said to him, 'If you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.'" I introduced myself, and he said he was Fr. Paul Francois de Sulauze, a French priest of the Congregation of St. John the Apostle. He was returning to Taiwan, where he and his community minister to the spiritual and temporal needs of the inner-city poor. We chatted until I had to board my flight.

As I settled into my seat I reflected on the importance of the evangelism work Catholic Answers will be doing in Manila next year. Fr. Sulauze is a priest today because he was given a solid formation in the faith. But what if he had been badly catechized and then converted by the Jehovah's Witnesses? What if he became, not a Catholic priest, but a Fundamentalist proselytizer out to convert Catholics?

I thought about the hundreds of thousands of young men and women from around the world who will be in Manila for World Youth Day. I thought about them and about what Iglesia ni Cristo and other anti-Catholic groups have in store for them. And I thought about the vocations to the priesthood and religious life that

could be lost to the Church if Catholic Answers and other groups don't go to Manila to share the faith and take a stand against the menace of the sects.

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