

## Asia Pacific Mission Studies

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### You Will See Greater Things Than These (JN. 1:50)

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# YOU WILL SEE GREATER THINGS THAN THESE (JN. 1:50)

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Sr. Merle “Ley” Salazar, FDNSC

## **The Promise**

It was October 2022. The 20th General Chapter of the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart has just ended. This Chapter was originally scheduled for March 2020. It was postponed indefinitely, and we all knew why. Covid-2019 made the whole world pause and many congregations had to postpone or cancel their chapters, assemblies and meetings. Then, after two and a half years of lockdown and uncertainty, the world started to resume its activities in 2022. The pandemic years were personally difficult for me. My mother died in October 2019 (just before the pandemic hit), but I really had no time to grieve because we had a General Chapter scheduled for March 2020. Then, the General Chapter which we had been preparing for since 2017 was cancelled, and the end of the mandate of our general council was postponed to an unknown time in the future. Fear of the virus was all around, community life was not normal (to say the least).

Hence, when we were finally able to hold the General Chapter in Rome in September of 2022, it was a relief. And, at least for me, it was a beautiful and successful General Chapter. At the end, I was profoundly grateful to God for it.

That day I was praying my thanksgiving; the gospel was John 1:43-51. As I reflected on this Gospel passage and thanked God for the successful Chapter, the words of Jesus spoke to me —“You will see greater things than these!” I was already so amazed at the Chapter, and God was saying, you will see greater things! In early November, I returned to the Philippines after almost 11 years in our Generalate in Rome. Little did I know that the promise of greater things was not so far away.

## **The Fulfillment of the Promise – EAPI**

Back in the Philippines, my leaders told me to first rest before taking on a new ministry. Like many religious, I did not want to or even know how to rest. Instead, I wanted to go to the Center for Ignatian Spirituality (CIS) to receive training on retreat giving and the ministry of spiritual direction. After that, I was intending to apply for mission in South Sudan. But God had other plans. It was already the end of 2022 and the CIS was not publishing its 2023 programs. My congregation leader in the Philippines searched and found EAPI online. She asked me to choose—they have 2 programs beginning January 2023, one for 4 months, and the other, for 6 months. Without even asking what the programs were, I immediately said I will take the one for 4 months. The sooner it was over, the better. Then I can get on with life. Hence, I enrolled in the EAPI 4 month program of January 2023. It turned out to be the Sabbatical Renewal Experience (SRE). I did not go to their website to check what the course was all about. The other sisters were telling me I will have a great time and meet new friends. I thought, I already have many friends, I have no need for more. I was not ready to have a great time. But again, God had other plans.

I first stepped into EAPI on Sunday, January 8, 2023 and right on that first day, I met new friends. There was one in particular with whom I became close, Sr. Delia Regidor, MIC. She was a former superior general, very sick (in fact, dying of cancer at that time) but very much alive and truly an inspiration. Sr. Delia finished the program but the sickness took its toll. She died early the following year, in March 2024. God promised that I will see greater things. The first fulfillment of this promise was meeting such a beautiful and inspiring soul in Sr. Delia. EAPI, being “residential,” offers that unique opportunity for participants to form deep friendships borne from living together for 4 to 6 months.

The programs started. There were 36 of us, attending two programs, the 6 month Pastoral Leadership and Management for Mission (PLMM) with 18 participants, and the Sabbatical Renewal Experience (SRE) with 18 participants. After the first week of Orientation, weekly modules followed. I did not know it, but as I stayed longer in EAPI, I realized that I had been in dire need of a “sabbatical.” Coming after almost 11 years in our General Council and the 2.5 years of the pandemic, I came back exhausted, and even angry. I needed physical rest, spiritual renewal and emotional healing. And the EAPI (the space, the people, the program) was the venue for such healing and renewal. I cannot pinpoint specifically what it was that brought about the change. I just noticed, from the middle of the second month and the third month, that I was already feeling better. That I was, in fact, better. By the time we completed the program in early May 2023, I did not want to leave anymore. I had found what *Evangelii Gaudium* #77 was referring to —

. . . spaces where pastoral workers can be helped and healed, ‘places where faith itself in the crucified and risen Jesus is renewed, where the most profound questions and daily concerns are shared, where deeper discernment about our experiences and life itself is undertaken in the light of the Gospel, for the purpose of directing individual and social decisions towards the good and beautiful’.

EAPI is such a “space,” and I am deeply grateful to God for bringing me to this space. I thank the Jesuits for building it and sustaining it for more than 60 years now. In this space, I have found new friends and have become and continue to become a new self.

But God was not yet finished in fulfilling his promise of greater things. After bringing me to this sacred space, He decided to plant me here.

## **Called to a New, a Greater Mission: Go with that Group!**

*Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (which means “son of Timaeus”), was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Jesus stopped and said, “Call him.” So they called to the blind man, “Cheer up! On your feet! He’s calling you.” Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus. “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked him. The blind man said, “Rabbi, I want to see.” “Go,” said Jesus, “your faith has healed you.” Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road. (Mark 10:46-52, New International Version)*

Sometime in February 2023, I was asked by two members of the EAPI staff what my next assignment was. Truthfully, I said none yet. Both of them, separately said, “*dito ka na lang*” (just stay here!). It was an invitation to become a member of the EAPI staff. This was totally unexpected. I found the invitation weird. I said that my hope was to apply for mission to South Sudan. Just a few days later, the Director, Fr. John Chechon Chong, SJ, formally offered me a job to become the Coordinator of the Sabbatical Program (the Program I was currently participating in). It would mean living in EAPI for most of the year, going home to my religious community only on weekends and in the months of July and December. I was not sure if such an arrangement would be acceptable to my Congregation. I had heard of a few of our sisters living in their place of ministry (and not in the community), but they were in other

countries. In the Philippines, such an arrangement was unheard of. So, the first thing for me to do was to check with my congregation leaders if such an arrangement was even possible. I got mixed responses. One leader was not sure, and the other was very excited about it. This mission offer had to be discerned, the Ignatian way! We were scheduled to have an 8-day Ignatian Retreat by March, and I asked to be given until after the retreat to give my answer to this most unexpected offer. I also asked the current coordinator of the SRE to accompany me in the retreat. If anything, I wanted to make sure that he knew that I was being offered his job! So, I went on retreat with the rest of my companions. I brought with me a very specific question—is this offer from the Lord? Is he calling me to this new mission? Is he sending me to this “sacred space”? Is this the will of the Lord for me and for EAPI at this time?

On one of the latter days of the retreat when we were asking for the grace to “know Jesus more clearly, to love him more dearly and to follow him more nearly.” One of the Gospel texts given for prayer was Mk 10: 46-52, the healing of the blind man Bartimeus. Being an Ignatian retreat, we were asked to engage in Ignatian Contemplation, that is, to imagine the scene and to insert oneself in the Gospel account. God has gifted me with a rich imagination so this is one of my favorite forms of prayer, and so I let my imagination take over. Today, as I look back, I can say that it was not just my imagination, in truth, the Holy Spirit took over! In my imaginative prayer, I saw myself sitting by the side of the road, carrying a heavy knapsack and accompanied by one of my sisters. Jesus of Nazareth was passing by. I was not blind, by the way, but like the blind man Bartimeus, I started shouting at the top of my voice, “Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me.” The drama continued and I kept on shouting while others were telling me to keep quiet. Then the lay staff person who had invited me to join the EAPI, came and said “*Uy Ley, tawag ka!*” (“Hey Ley, He is calling you!”). So, I left my heavy knapsack, jumped up and went to Jesus. Faithful to the script, Jesus asked me “What do you want me to do for you?” Adlibbing I said, “Lord, I want to follow you!” and Jesus said “Ok, go with that group!” pointing to a group of men, the EAPI Jesuits.

This prayer was further confirmed in other prayer periods during the retreat, as well as in subsequent events. By April, I was already signing my “employment contract,” and I finally and officially started following Jesus “with that group” on the first of June 2023. As I write this essay, my three-year contract is coming to completion. I now look back at these exciting, challenging, enriching, humbling, empowering three years of mission in EAPI.

## **EAPI: From a “Space” of Renewal to a “Field” of Mission**

### **Year 1: Called and Sent**

My first year as a member of the EAPI Leadership Team was from June 2023 to June 2024. God was generous to me; this was a honeymoon period. My own participation in the January to May 2023 Sabbatical Renewal Experience (SRE) prepared me very well for the work of coordinating the program. I reviewed the modules and facilitators and evaluated the program activities from the lens of a program participant. As the new group of participants arrived, I saw that I could relate with them, I understood what they were experiencing, I could identify with their needs because only a few months earlier, I was a participant myself. I was truly one among them. It was very exciting and challenging at the same time. For my first SRE group, there were 19 participants from 13 different counties—former superiors, missionaries, formators, etc. All coming, each with his/her own burden, all called by our loving God to rest for a while and experience his renewing love.

There were the other groups too, the participants of the PRD (Pastoral Renewal for Discipleship) and there were 30 of them. Although I was not directly accompanying them, we formed one community—an intercultural (coming from different countries), intergenerational (of different ages), inter-vocational (lay, religious, clergy), inter-congregational group of men and women, all living together, forming one EAPI community. Where else can this be found? Where else can this be experienced? That year offered experiences that I had never dreamed of, even in my wildest dreams.

My “job” did not only include coordinating the sabbatical program and accompanying the participants, to my “surprise,” it also included bringing participants to hospitals and caring for them; working for the release of a participant held at the immigration in the airport; touring them to different places in Manila . . . name it, it was all part of the job!

I remembered my prayer when I was discerning this mission. I said that I wanted to follow Jesus and he said, *go with that group*. I was not called and sent for a specific job or role—I was called and sent to follow Jesus with this group. On my first year, I saw the mission evolve before my eyes in the most unexpected ways. What a privilege it is to be missioned to and in EAPI!

In that first year, I also began to know the EAPI Leadership Team and employees, and I do not mean just knowing names. I began to see what happened behind the scenes, things that were unknown to me as a participant. I learned, experientially, what EAPI claims to teach, synodal and collaborative leadership, a new way of being Church. I learned that EAPI, this “space where pastoral workers are helped and healed”, this sacred space where the Holy Spirit is very actively working, is also, at the same time, a space occupied by humans, where human weakness, vulnerability and imperfection is truly at play. The members of the leadership team, both Jesuits and non-Jesuits, are human! Like in any other human organization, there are conflicts, personality clashes and relational difficulties. It did not take long for me to see and experience the “humanness” of the EAPI. The longer I stayed, the more I saw the weaknesses and imperfections of the organization, and the more convinced I became that it is the work of the Spirit. How else can I explain the very real healing and renewal that the people who come for the programs experience? It can only be the work of God’s Spirit.

My first year ended with me feeling truly amazed at the EAPI and its mission! God was right, I was seeing greater things. People thanked me for saying yes to becoming a part of the EAPI family and told me that I am a gift to EAPI. Yes, that must be true. But it is equally true, or even more true, that the EAPI and its Mission is a gift to me. I felt at home and energized. I felt I

was in the right place. I felt God using my gifts to maximum capacity. I felt on mission to the whole world, to the five continents, what a privilege! I really felt happy, content! I was grateful! What a gift! How generous God is to me for having called and sent me here.

### **Year 2: Taken, blessed and broken**

Even before that first fiscal year ended, the honeymoon came to an end. My mission in EAPI expanded further and continued to evolve. Aside from coordinating the Sabbatical Programs, I was asked to handle the Institute's finance function. This was a call I was very reluctant to say yes to. I have both the academic training and the experience for it (I am a Certified Public Accountant and worked as a Budget Manager before entering the convent), but like Jonah, I wanted to run away. But God has a way of fulfilling his mission through us and in us. Through the finance function, I believe God was fulfilling his mission in EAPI through me and also continuing to fulfill His mission of transforming me more to His likeness through EAPI. My second year, July 2024 to June 2025, was a year of being taken, being blessed, and being broken. As I look back, I thank God that it is in EAPI that the "breaking" happened because EAPI is a safe holding environment. Did I not say that here, the Holy Spirit is actively at work and involved in our lives? At the end of the year, I was profoundly grateful, for God has carried me through. I would like to believe that our participants experience something similar—in this holding environment we call EAPI—God is experienced as a warm embrace even through, and especially, in the coldest and most painful of days.

### **Year 3: Given away**

I am now almost at the end of my third fiscal year, July 2025 to June 2026. As I finish writing this reflection, I receive news of the death of one of our recent participants and, I guess how I feel is the closest I can get to feeling like a mother who lost a child. I am heartbroken. His co-participants are expressing the same feeling. He is not the first one. As I have shared, one of

my SRE companions in 2023, Sr. Delia, MIC, died in March 2024. A second one, Fr. Seby, OFM, from PNG who attended the August to November 2024 SRE died in early January 2025. And now, Fr. Paulus, CICM, from Indonesia who attended the August to November 2025 SRE died today, February 14, 2026. As we grieve their passing, I pray that their sabbatical experience in EAPI prepared them for the great day of finally meeting our Lord face to face. Sr. Delia, Fr. Seby, Fr. Paulus, dear SRE friends and companions, rest in peace and pray for us.

The EAPI experience does not end in EAPI. The SRE program description says:

Here the participant rediscovers the richness of one's being, appreciates more profoundly the graciousness and beauty of God's creative love, and thus prepares to re-engage the mission of the Church with greater generosity and compassion.

It is good to be at EAPI but the EAPI fails in its mission if we all end up building a tent here and refusing to go down the mountain. At the end, EAPI simply sets the stage for the participant to re-engage the Mission of Christ with greater generosity and compassion for others and for oneself. Even I, who have been given the rare privilege of staying in EAPI, can say that now, I am not a participant anymore, I am now on mission. In EAPI we are being taken, blessed, broken and given away . . . like our calling, sending Lord, like the Master, we follow.

For the past 60 years, thousands (almost 8,000) of participants have learned in EAPI's classrooms, have slept on its beds, have eaten in its dining hall, have celebrated in its halls, and have prayed together in its chapels and prayer rooms. Thousands have experienced God's healing and renewing love and received pastoral training in different ways. Thousands are back in the fields of mission! Some of them, are now with the Lord himself, cheering us on!

After 60 years, the EAPI Mission continues! From where I stand, I am seeing greater things and all "Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam!"

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SR. MERLE “LEY” SALAZAR, FDNCS, is a member of the Congregation of the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, founded in France in 1874. Before she joined the congregation, she was a Certified Public Accountant, and worked as a manager for Budget and Finance Planning. She has a Master’s Degree in Religious Studies, majoring in Scripture, from the Institute of Formation and Religious Studies (IFRC). In 2011, she was elected to her congregation’s General Council, in charge of formation and accompaniment of their lay members throughout the world, and lived in Rome until her term ended in 2022. She participated in the EAPI Sabbatical Renewal Program in 2023, and has now taken on the role of Sabbatical Renewal Program Coordinator, while also offering Spiritual Accompaniment to participants.