

A LASALLIAN APOSTOLATE AMONG THE HANSENITE PATIENTS IN TALA

1. TALA:

An Evolving Community for Hansenites

The history of Tala began in 1940 when the government bought the property and a hospital was built for Hansenites. After World War II, 500 Hansenites from San Lazaro Hospital in Manila were transferred to Tala.

For many years, Tala was a closed community where patients were not allowed to leave the hospital compound and their immediate families could not live with them. But in the mid-60s, when it was discovered that leprosy was not hereditary and could not be easily transmitted, the Director of the hospital started the practice of allowing non-patients, normally immediate family members and relatives of patients, to live in the leprosarium compound.

At present, the leprosarium covers a land area of 130 hectares with a population of about 10,000 to 12,000 people. About 2,500 of them are Hansenites and the rest are family members who are non-patients.

A pressing problem is the economic difficulty of the people in Tala. Only about 20% of the population are employed. The rest of the 80% are unemployed and this often leads to boredom and idleness. Some are self-employed as jeepney or pedicab drivers, vendors, pig raisers, etc. Hansenite patients are entitled to free daily food rations from the government hospital. But this is sufficient for the patient only and not enough for the members of his family. There are a few cases in which a parent would be happy to discover that her child has signs of leprosy because this would entitle the child to free daily rations. Aside from the food rations, the government also provides the following privileges to the lepers: free medicine, the rights to a small piece of land to build a house in the hospital compound, rationed water supply and electricity for the homes. But due to the irregularities in the management of the hospital, the medical and social assistance from the government is inadequate. The Church tries to supply the needs of the indigent pa-

tients through projects like a feeding program for malnourished children, housing assistance for patients, piggery projects, and food supplements for poor families.

Another problem among the patients is the result of the government's practice of providing what the patients need for survival (food, medicine, shelter). This is the attitude of dependence and lack of initiative. The government's practice of providing the basic needs of the patients may be due to the physical handicap that the patients suffer. Their deformities and the social stigma that is attached to the disease have prevented them from finding employment and a source of income. There is also the attitude among leper patients that the disease has made their lives meaningless and their future as hopeless. Since these people were "separated" from the rest of society, the government had to take care of them and provide for their material needs. This led to their tendency to be very dependent and develop the "give me this, give me that" attitude.

In 1950, a Dominican priest opened the Holy Rosary Vocational School, which was later changed to Holy Rosary College. Initially, admission to the school was open to leper patients only and they had to be given a daily allowance by the priest to encourage them to go to school. At present, it is a purely charitable institution for Hansenite patients, their spouses and children. The school offers a high school and a complete collegiate course leading to the degree of Bachelor of Science in Education. Through the years, many patients have benefitted from the school and are now employed as teachers in the various schools around Tala.

In 1984, the Brothers opened a new community in Tala to assist the hospital Chaplain in the administration and teaching work in Holy Rosary College.

2. The De La Salle Brothers Community in Tala: Who are we as a community group? Why are we here in Tala?

We are a group of Filipino La Salle Brothers, called to a life of religious consecration and service in the education of youth, especially the poor.

Fully conscious of the thrust of the Church which calls for a preferential option for the poor; of the Institute's re-orientation towards direct service of the poor; the special charism of St. John Baptist de la Salle; and in response to our District Corporate Plan that called for the establishment of a community among the poor.

We have volunteered to live and work among the community of Hansenite patients at the Tala Leprosarium... a community that is poor because of the truly adverse economic conditions of its population... a community that is poor because the disease

that afflicts many of its members is one that causes the dread and rejection by society.

We are here in response to Christ's call to serve his poor, with Him as our example and guide.

What do we expect to do with our life and activity?

— Through faithfully living our religious consecration individually and as a community, to give existential witness to Gospel values.

— Through our dedication to our tasks as teachers in school, to contribute to the quality of education in Holy Rosary College.

— Through our availability, to share our resources to the community through involvement in pastoral activities to the community of Tala.

— Through our solidarity with the local Church and with the people, to support the initiatives, efforts, and programs set up and carried out by other groups (religious and lay) working in Tala.

— Through our sharing and communication with other communities in the District, to enrich the lives of the Brothers and of the Institute with our experiences and graces of working with the poor.

— Through prayer and by being available for visits, live-ins, and talks to students and youth, to promote vocations to the priestly and the religious life.

3. The Brothers' Involvement In School And Community Activities

a) Holy Rosary College

The Brothers volunteered to work in Tala primarily to teach full time in the school. All the teachers are lepers and are graduates of the college. Due to their physical condition, they could not possibly find employment in schools outside Tala. Hence, they preferred to teach in Holy Rosary. The Brothers handle almost all the religion classes in the

high school and college. Efforts are being done to strengthen the campus ministry program to deepen the spiritual formation of the faculty and students.

The students are composed of leper patients and children of patients. Not all the students who graduated from high school go on to college. They either do not want to become teachers or they did not pass the requirements for the teacher training program. In order that these youths do not become idle, a vocational training program in electrical technology and electronics was established. Hence, even if these students do not go on to college, they can receive some training and find employment as skilled workers.

b) Youth Ministry

A potential problem in Tala is the out-of-school youth. Due to the lack of training and qualifications, they cannot find employment. Some manage to find temporary work like repairing roads or digging canals. But when the project is finished, they are again jobless and idle. There were efforts in the past to organize these youths and involve them in worthwhile projects, but these were not too successful. A Brother has taken over as Coordinator of the youth ministry. At this stage, plans are being made to come up with activities that will be meaningful and meets the needs of the youth.

c) Organizing Exposure Programs for Students of other La Salle Schools

Tala is an ideal place to bring students who come from affluent backgrounds to expose them to the living conditions of the poor. They visit the patients in the hospital wards and cottages, go to the homes of patients, and have dialogues with the students of Holy Rosary and other youth leaders. The results of these exposures have been very positive.

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TALA