

A brief history of the Jose De Piro Centre for Arts



The entrance to the centre.

Background

Santa Katalina parish was founded in 2005. The parish is located in the village of Pagalanggang, in the town of Dinalupihan, Bataan Province, The Philippines. Before this, the church was part of a nearby parish.

Rice fields are the main source of income and employment of the people living in Pagalanggang. A recent study reveals that while these provinces usually have very rich natural resources, people living there are unemployed due to the lack of development in these areas, and they find it hard to study and develop their skills. Many people in Pagalanggang can only work during the dry season and are unemployed for the rest of the year.

Apart from lacking the bare necessities which families require, the area also lacks family oriented recreational parks and places where people can spend their free time.

This situation frequently forces people to move out of the area to look for better opportunities; many end up living in slums in Manila.



Rice fields – the main source of employment in the area of Pagalanggang.

The beginning

The Missionary Society of Saint Paul (MSSP) took over the Pagalanggang parish in 2005. The principal mission of the society has been to find ways to help the community develop further. The plan was focus human resources.



Pagalanggang and the surrounding mountains.

When Fr Joe Cremona arrived in the parish he noticed that the children were spending most of their free time at the parish centre. The parish centre quickly became a safe place where the children could gather instead of roaming the village streets. Fr Joe quickly started organising some activities for these children. The first initiatives were basketball, the use of the internet and movies; meals were also provided for the children.



The site today occupied by the Jose De Piro Centre for Arts.

Introducing music

Gradually the number of children attending the parish grew. Salamon, a volunteer missionary from Peru, started guitar lessons; the children started learning the guitar and playing at parish Masses. Later Kevin Grech from Malta donated a set of drums, and a small band was formed.

Jacob Portelli a violin player also from Malta, visited the centre and some of the children asked Fr Joe whether they could learn the violin. Moved by their enthusiasm and since the centre had always valued the children's opinions, Fr Joe bought three violins and a mandolin. Thanks to a number of contributions from Maltese donors, a group of children started learning the violin under the supervision of a professional teacher.

Meanwhile a number of girls were offered voice training sessions for three consecutive summers and another group of girls were offered the opportunity to study piano for two summers.



Early days – the members of the Ronadlia.



The Ronadlia during a performance.

From a Rondalia to an Orchestra

In 2012 the students who were initially studying music individually were brought together to form a Rondalia (a traditional Philippino folk band). This was possible thanks to the support of Clusters, a group of youth from Malta. Classes were also built with the support of Maltese benefactors and a contribution from the Outside Development Assistance programme of the Maltese government.

When the Rondalia started, children asked to learn other instruments. In a short time the centre had thirty children playing 14-chord mandolins, a double bass and a cajon. This attracted the interest of an even greater number of children and youth and Sir Nestor Enriquez was employed to teach the Rondalia.

Under the supervision of this teacher, and acting on his suggestion, woodwind instruments including the saxophone, clarinet and flute were introduced. In 2013 Chris Ellul, a Maltese seminarian, visited the Jose De Piro Centre and with his help a trumpet and a trombone were added. Thus the Rondalia evolved into a 45-member youth orchestra.

In 2014 Maestro Edwin Lumanug was asked to direct the orchestra, leading to an important qualitative change in the instruments used by the orchestra.

In 2014 the centre was visited by Peter Paul Galea, a popular Maltese musician. Due to an injury he had to spend an extended period of time at the centre. This proved providential as during his stay he tutored the members of the orchestra, further inspiring children and youth in their commitment to music. The orchestra was also helped by a group of volunteers from Malta who constantly supported the orchestra.



The Kabataan (Youth) Orchestra – 13th August 2017

Aiming for quality and thanks to the assistance of Maestro Christopher Muscat and Maestro Lyndsay Mallia, the youth orchestra entered into a relationship with some members of the Malta Philharmonic Orchestra. Members from the Maltese orchestra and other Maltese professionals have since, been guiding, teaching and directing students in Bataan over the internet, using Skype.



Children in the internet room learning music, interacting with their teachers online, and in their free time.

Apart from this online opportunity some members of the youth orchestra travelled to Malta to attend one-month intensive masterclasses in music, further improving their musical competence.

The visit by Raul Montoya Vergara, head of the Youth Orchestra of the Americas (YOA), Manhattan, was another important milestone. In his interaction with the students, Mr Vergara was greatly impressed by their potential, leading him to extend his visit at the centre and to endorse the youth orchestra. Mr Vergara is now organising for teachers of different musical instruments to visit the centre to work individually and collectively with orchestra members. This greatly enriches the orchestra members' and the orchestra's repertoire.

All this led to the formation of the Jose De Piro Kabataan (youth) Orchestra, a name chosen by the members themselves. It is also worth noting that Rome Jake Fajardo, one of the original group of children attending the centre, has continued to commit himself to the centre, helping the centre to flourish and develop further.



One of the performances of the youth orchestra – August 2017.

Two years after its small beginnings in 2014 the orchestra was receiving very positive reviews. Critics positively commented about the high quality and abilities of the orchestra and its members. Under the direction of Maestro Felicitto Sacdalan who succeeded Maestro Lumanug in 2016, what started as an orchestra playing only popular music, now evolved into an orchestra with a repertoire including classical music. Looking ahead, and aiming to include younger members, a beginners' section was set and placed under the supervision of Robert Salazar.

At present the orchestra is made up of 80 active and talented musicians. Apart from these members who attend the centre daily for music practice and for personal formation, members from the organising team at the center also visit various schools in the area teaching music to 16 classes of students and three groups of teachers.

One must also stress that since its beginning, the centre has always provided all its services, its teaching and the orchestra instruments free of charge.

Furthermore, students sit for international ABRSM music exams; since 2016 Mayor Maria Angela S. Garzia has been paying the fees for exam sessions. The centre is proud to note that a large number of those sitting for these exams successfully obtain very high grades. The education received at the centre, and helped by the partial funding from this



The beginners' section of the orchestra during one of their daily rehearsals.



Teaching Music and arts in schools is also part of the Jose De Piro Center for Arts mission.

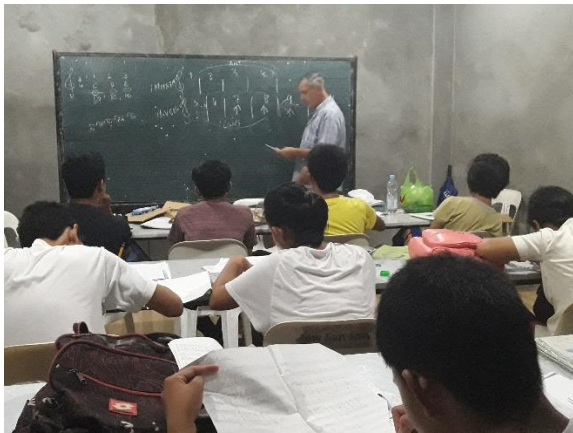
centre, two members of the orchestra are currently specialising in music at the St Scholastica College of Music, Manila, while two others have passed the admission exam and will start their studies in July 2018. Another female student will be studying theatre arts at the Polytechnic University of the Philippines and another one is preparing to sit for the music admission test at the end of February 2018. The University of St Scholastica has offered a sponsored scheme for these youth to cover both their tuition and miscellaneous expenses, as long as they keep up their high marks. Moreover these students need financial support for their accommodation in Manila and to travel back to their families on the weekend.

From Music to Arts

What started as a small group of children idly wasting their time roaming the streets of their village, has rapidly developed to an active hub of music and a centre of spiritual formation.

In order to instil in students the ability to believe in themselves and achieve further, in 2017 the centre was officially recognised as a non-governmental organisation with the name of

Jose De Piro Center for Arts. The centre now intends to offer students further possibilities and adequate space to develop their artistic skills and educational competences.



Fr Joe Cremona teaching students music theory and practice, helping them to prepare for their exams.



One of the youth orchestra performances in Manila - 2017



Fr Joe Cremona and volunteer George Cremona noticed that among those attending the orchestra; many also enjoy singing during their free time. This became evident observing their behaviour between rehearsals and on their way home. This keen and natural singing interest sparked a discussion about the possibility of complementing the orchestra with a choir.

During the first meeting of the NGO on the 14th of August 2017, it was decided that the centre should start providing for other students whose interests include singing, dancing, drama and design. Auditions commenced in September 2017 with the intention of presenting the first performance in January 2018.

Special Thanks to the following friends and benefactors:

Mark Abela
Marcelline Agius
Lea Alcaraz
Mark Attard
Ryan Aquilina
Moiria Azzopardi Barbieri
Maria Bianco
Christine Borg
Mr. and Mrs. Paul Borg
Sonia Borg
Marthese Brincat
F. Raymond Bugeja
Paul Busuttil
Fiorella Camilleri
Adrian Cassar and the Pass it on Community
Marie Claire Cremona
Norman Christina
Michael Ciantar
Beng Corcolla
Fr Karm Debattista mssp and CAM Youths (Malta)
Attorney Jakly Hanna P. Devilla
Jason Edwards
Fr Bernard Falzon mssp
Fr Clinton Farrugia mssp
Eng. Joseph Fenech
Luthiers Sans Frontiers
Marie Claire Fenech
Mr & Mrs Joseph Galea
Mayor Maria Angela Garcia
Charlie Grima
Emilio Amir Hamud Cortes
Anna Hiemstra
Thomas Kalotas
Lee and Mariclare Larrard
Maltese Embassy in Beijing, China
Mission Fund (Malta)
MSSP Missionaries in Philippines, Malta and Australia.
Millete Macaliniao
Fr Louis Mallia mssp (Director, Missionary Animation Centre, Malta)

Maestro Lindsey Mallia
Guido Mamo
Geraldyn McCarthy
Pat McEvoy
John McDonough
Etienne Micallef
Fr Marcellino Micallef ofm
Maestro Christopher Muscat
Jean Claude Muscat
Bro David Pace mssp
Tony Pace
Chairman Felicito Payumo
Fr Jude Pirota mssp
Dr Chris Porter
Ricardo Ramos
Wayne Ruston
Doreen Saliba
Julia Sarano and Open String
Maria Schembri
Michelle Scicluna
Jonathan Spiteri
Joseph Spiteri (late)
St Bernadette Parish, North Sunshine, (Vic, Australia)
St James the Apostle Parish, Hoppers Crossing North, (Vic, Australia)
St John Parish, Heidelberg, (Vic, Australia)
St Scholastic College of Music
The Clusters – CAM Youths (Malta)
The Deputies (music band)
Tribali
Dra. Ma. Filipina Vallarta
Luke Vella
Walter Vella
Elena Vigna
Pippa Xuereb
Young Paulists, St James Parish, Hoppers Crossing North, (Vic, Australia)
Glen Zammit
Fr Mario Zammit

All volunteers and lay missionaries who visit and support Pagalannang Parish.