

Gifts given and gifts received

Fr Phongphand "Jub" Phokthavi's reflection on the day of his Final Vows on January 3, 2019

As the day of my Final Vows in the Society of Jesus approached on the 3rd of January (the Solemnity of the Holy Name of Jesus), one common question people asked me was: *how do you feel? Are you ready?*

The answer to these questions is: I feel normal; nothing has changed since the day I took First Vows in this least Society of Jesus 17 years ago at St Ignatius Novitiate in Singapore. However, this does not mean that the Final Vows have no meaning to me; in contrast, they affirm the graces and gifts that God constantly provides me all these years in the Society. The calling to the Final Vows is the fruit of God's providence in my life, that God is always present and has journeyed with me long before I accepted the invitation to join the Jesuits.

A few days after my Final Vows will be the Feast of the Epiphany. The three *magi* followed the star to give homage to the King of the Jews, who came to bring salvation to the Israelites. The bright star brought them to meet the little Infant who lay peacefully in the manger – gentle and vulnerable – with Mary and Joseph at his side. The three *magi* gave their gifts of high value – gold, frankincense and myrrh – to the child, the little Infant Jesus. The gifts were worthy for a king in the eyes of the three *magi* (and of us all), but were these gifts of any use to the little Infant Jesus? I wonder!

In my reflection, I recalled this similar scene of the Epiphany in the time I worked on the Thai-Myanmar border to serve the Shan migrants and refugees. One day I went to visit them in a big orange orchard. The workers (Shan migrants) had to spray insecticide on the orange trees several times a day. The whole area smelled strongly of insecticide. As I entered to visit one house, I found a lady holding her son about 11 years old on her lap. The boy's name was Champ and he suffered from brain damage from exposure to the poisonous insecticide. He could not move his lips to speak but could only make sounds with his mouth. I felt very much moved by the love the mother gave to Champ. Every time I visited them bearing little presents, the mother would call out, "Look, Champ, what Uncle Jub has brought for you!" I wonder whether the gifts ever brought any joy or happiness to Champ and his mother – the gifts given.

One thing is certain: during that visit, I felt strongly within me a sense of mission to do anything to help this poor family. The love that the mother had for her vulnerable son stirred up in me a sense of praise to God and a strong motivation to serve the poor, with courage to go against injustice and difficulties to bring them hope and to make them feel that they are loved – the gifts received.

The three *magi* after visiting the little Infant Jesus returned home another way as the angel told them in a dream. I wonder what happened to the three *magi* after they met Jesus. I think they might have felt similar to what I felt when I met Champ and his mother. They glorified God and with courage went against King Herod's unjustly command. With great hope they went back home to bring the good news to the people that the love of God, as the prophets foretold, is true and it is happening. The three *magi* were themselves the gifts received to share with all.

As I reflect on my Final Vows day, the love of God has been inviting me since the day I was born to work as one of Jesus' companions. The Courage, the Hope, the Light, the Truth – all these are gifts I receive and give in fulfilling God's mission of love for His people. *Deo Gratias!*
