



## **ASIA/PHILIPPINES - Young congregation of sisters committed to combat trafficking of girls at the roots**

Cebu (Agenzia Fides) – The Philippines are the fourth of ten countries with the highest rates of child prostitution. This scourge affects girls from 15 to 20 years, but also often involves girls of just eight years of age. According to information received by Fides from Catholic News Agency, Sister Irene Baquiran, from the Archdiocese of Cebu's Congregation of “Immaculate Mary Queen of Heaven Missionaries”, IMQHM, committed to evangelising the downtrodden, stated that the victims are forced to partake in 5-10 sexual encounters a night for two dollars an encounter. Most of the girls are drugged by their pimps to survive this horror and so are also hooked on narcotics. To combat the poverty at its roots, the missionary sisters of IMQHM are based in the same remote villages where the pimps prey on the girls with the promise of a good job in the city. Through Feeding of the Good Shepherd Foundation's pilot program, trying to educate them to stop the cycle of prostitution. When walking the streets, Sister Irene said they travel in pairs, not dressed in habits. One will go into a bar and offer love and a listening ear to the young women who may need someone to turn to, while the other acts as a lookout. If the nuns have befriended an underage girl who wants to escape, Sister Irene said prior arrangements are made with an orphanage where the child can receive a new home and education.

CNA reports that the sisters transformed their house in Cebu into the “House of Love”, also called MQHM Rehabilitation and Livelihood Training Centre, where they provide shelter, food, education, health care, counseling and job skills to former prostitutes. Their children also are welcomed. Currently, 20 victims of human trafficking are living with them. The sisters are also helping to educate more than 800 students in elementary school and 275 in high school. The Immaculate Mary Queen of Heaven Missionaries have big plans to expand their mission by building a large complex that can house up to 500 women and children up to five years. By 2012, the nuns hope to introduce vocational courses and high school courses. The order, founded in 1996 by Sister Corazon Salazar, has eight professed nuns, 11 with temporary vows and three novices. Their charism – “We are the extension of the heart and hands of the good shepherd looking for the lost sheep” – is lived not only by rescuing women and children victims of prostitution off the streets but also by breaking the cycle of poverty, the root cause of prostitution. (AP) (23/2/2011 Agenzia Fides)