

Greetings to all from Hilongos, Leyte - The Philippines

Monthly Diary No19 - June 30 2008 -

REGISTERED NAME: Edmund Rice Brothers, The Philippines, Inc.

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Quote of the Month:

"To be wronged is nothing, unless you insist on remembering it"



It is time that I put a few words on paper to try and give you an impression of our life here, in a small rural town in The Philippines. It is small by Filipino standards, as far as population goes, with a population of about 55,000 in the town, although it is not too difficult to walk around the whole town in about one hour. Area wise, it is about half the size of a town like Alexandra. Here, however, people tend to live close together, making living areas densely- populated. Land is expensive for the majority, and difficult to obtain, so every available space (so it seems) is made use of. Several "homes" (constructed of bamboo, palm branches, scrap timber, plastic sheeting and rusty roofing iron) near to us are built in the mangrove swamp, as nobody seems to own the swampy land, which of course is under water twice a day as the high tide arrives. The town has a sizeable population of quite poor people who do not have access to running water or electricity in their houses, so daily survival is a difficult task for them. There is no such thing as unemployment benefit, DPB, subsidized medication, Social Welfare, Medicare etc. Life for many is lived at the edge. We are a part of the small percentage of people who can be called fortunate, as we have a small, but comfortable house to live in, rain does not come through the roof, there are mosquito screens over the windows, we have a refrigerator, and we do not have to worry about where tomorrow's meal is coming from.

School began in the first week of June, and is now in full swing. It certainly is a difference system over here, not only in education but also in most aspects of life, and one soon learns not to take anything for granted. The three of us here in the community have decided this school year, June 2008 - April 2009, that we will immerse ourselves in the local Catholic School, St. Teresa's, here in Hilongos. It is Primary (elementary) School, and High School rolled into one. The Americans established the system of general school education here, during the years when the Philippines was a USA Protectorate, from 1898 – 1948. Hence, the school year is based on a timeline that is quite unlike those that exist in NZ and Australian schools. Schooling goes almost continuously for 10 months, and then here is a long summer holiday time (two complete months or about 9 weeks) during which some students will come back for "summer school classes". The school year begins in the first week of June and ends in the last week of March, the following year. Summer holiday break is all of April and all of May. We seem to have a three term year which is quite strange in its design, with the first term being 21 weeks long (yes, that's right, only 21 weeks!). Then we have the luxury of one week's holiday before term two begins, which is all of 7 weeks long! We are able to have a two week break over Christmas and New Year, and then 13 weeks for the third term, as long as we complete 205 days of teaching. The regular school day consists of 8 one-hour periods. First period begins at 7.30 am, and the last period ends at 5pm. This is for all students, from Grade One (6 and 7 year olds) up to the High School seniors. No wonder the students tend to look like washed-out zombies by the end of the day. The system is, of course designed by politicians, who presumably have never had anything to do with teaching. Since I have only 6 hours of classroom contact teaching time per day, I am able to be classified as a full-time teacher. Anything less and I would become a part-timer. Some of this is my own fault, as I did suggest that my having 58 students in the senior physics class, may not be conducive to quality teaching and learning, so the management were able to reprogramme the timetable to give me two streams of senior

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physics per day, with 29 in each. The same thing happened with my senior RE classes. The timetable does not rotate the classes during the week, so each day has exactly the same subjects at exactly the same time as the day before. Therefore, I teach one of my senior physics classes, 7.30 – 8.50 am each morning, whilst the other stream of senior physics are taught by me, every afternoon from 3.40 pm - 5.00 pm. Rotation of periods seems to be in the “too hard “basket. Yes, you did read correctly. Each of my science periods is 80 minutes long. Up until two years ago, every subject had periods of 60 minutes duration. Then the Philippines did poorly in some international standardized testing of students’ knowledge of science. Consequently, the Government decided that every school must teach science for 80 minutes each day. If the results are no better in the next set of international standardized testing, then science will have to be taught for 90 minutes per day. The floggings will continue until morale improves. Added onto this, the senior class (60 students) must come to school for classes (7 hours worth) each Saturday for the next nine Saturdays. This means that I must teach two hours of senior physics each Saturday for the next nine Saturdays, as also must the English teacher, Mathematics teacher, Social Science teacher etc..... The local teachers do not receive any extra salary for these extra hours of Saturday teaching. Why is this done? Answer : because in late August the senior class will sit some rather important National exams to determine which Tertiary College may accept them at the end of their secondary education. Hence there are nine Saturdays of cramming and revision. The textbooks are mostly very uninspiring, printed on butcher paper, and quite expensive. The students are expected to purchase their own textbooks, but it seems to me that even in the senior classes, less than 50% of students possess a textbook. They are simply too expensive. My classroom has no doors, but that is OK as it has no glass in the windows either, just an open space to the outside. (Natural air conditioning) Consequently when it rains, we tend to get flooding inside. However, I have it easy, as at least my classroom has electricity, which is more than can be said for some of the others. There is also a nice circular hole in the blackboard, so I try to write around that. The science lab has 1 Bunsen, 6 beakers, 1 flask, 5 measuring cylinders and 12 test tubes, plus some ancient samples of about half a dozen chemicals. I will be doing the rounds soon, begging and borrowing. Despite all these difficulties and challenges, the students are very open, friendly, and thirsting for an education. They also have the mindset, that if they are going to make anything of their lives, then it is up to themselves (with their teachers) to make it happen. Nobody is going to be laying on “free this, or free that”, subsidized this or that, students loans etc for them.

We experienced our first Filipino typhoon (for some strange reason it was named “Typhoon Frank”) last weekend (21st June), as it passed by. The eye of the typhoon (cyclone in the South Pacific), was approximately 150 km away, so we were not too badly off. I had experienced five cyclones in five weeks in the Cook Islands in 2005, so was not too concerned. School was cancelled on the Friday, which was just as well, as we had heavy rain, and the electricity to the town was knocked out. The seas were rough, and the next day the wind picked up. Houses close to the shoreline had to be evacuated as the waves pounded in. We battened down and stayed inside, although we were without electricity for two days. Other parts of the country were more severely hit, and lives were lost. The largest tragedy was the sinking of a passenger ferry which had 800 passengers and crew on board. It is unknown why the captain decided to sail, when the message had been proclaimed about the typhoon arriving within a few hours. There seems to be some sort of Civil Defense organization, but it did not appear to be overly organized. There are huge problems with providing adequate communications throughout the country, and ensuring that all people have warnings of potential rogue weather, sufficiently ahead of time.

Anyway, that seems to be enough of my diary for the moment. Cannot afford to be late to bed here in Hilongos. It seems sensible to at least get a few hours sleep before midnight, as the bell-ringer at our parish church, faithfully rings the huge tower bell some 77 times every morning at 4.30 am, being able to be heard all across the town. Apparently it is another tradition that stretches back to the 17th cent, and

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must be continued, despite driving people crazy. Enough said. Regards
Perkins

Frank

Yes, it's raining again. No, not another typhoon like our very recent one, Typhoon Frank. Frank wreaked millions of pesos damage in his brief violent visit to many parts of Negros, including the sinking of a passenger ferry with about 800 on board - very few survivors! Divers are still working to free the many bloated bodies trapped in the wreckage. We were spared any major damage, DG!

On a brighter note! Last Wednesday, June 25, three of the Deacons of Kabankalan Diocese, namely Eugene, Johnny and Romeo, were ordained to the priesthood by our Salesian Bishop Patrick Buzon. A very moving and joyful event! I made my debut with the Cathedral Choir, ably supported by Peter Hardiman. Our 3 new priests celebrated their First Masses together over the next 3 days. We were able to attend only 2 of these Masses because of our school commitments.

At yesterday's celebration with Fr. Johnny at Payao Bishop Patrick remarked on the great way the Brothers have entered so fully and enthusiastically into the life of the Diocese.

Yesterday evening, June 27, marked the feast of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. Each Wednesday morning the Perpetual Novena of Our Lady is held in the Cathedral prior to the 5.45am Mass. So there was a good crowd celebrating the evening festive Mass. Again, the Cathedral Choir was in good voice.

Rod is away at the Provincial Chapter in Brisbane. We expect him back this coming week. Peter has settled into his role in the RE faculty of Kabankalan Catholic College with classes MWF! His "spare time" is taken up with preparation of classes, guitar lessons, studying Ilonggo, his own music and keeping us solvent! John has launched a crash program (ALS, alternative learning scheme) for High Schools dropouts, age range 16 - 28, young men and women. About 60 "learners" signed up initially, but daily attendance, so far, is a variable number. John and I give support and help to our 2 Ilonggo lady teachers. These had already assisted with non-starter pre-schools kids, most of whom have now passed on to regular elementary classes in this new school year. The ALS students are still settling into their regular classes, which will lead to an exam, possibly in October, which could secure their admission into College or vocational school.

Peter, coming from distant WA, remains our leading tipster in the weekly NRL footy tipping competition while Rod holds a commanding lead in the AFL tipping. Our Ilonggo studies have become somewhat spasmodic over the last couple of weeks because of various activities and celebrations. It's slow, demanding work!

So, cheerio to all our friends, especially all at the Chapter.

Neil.

I always have the last say as editor and chief. Good bye till next time P Thrupp – Hilongos.



Independence Day 2008