

## *Greetings from the Hilongos Community - The Philippines*

**A**s Christmas approaches, many traditional practices that are common in the Philippines, kick into action. Almost all of these practices are introduced, and not of Filipino origin. Unfortunately, many American influences abound here, and so at the beginning of November, we have children roaming the streets, celebrating Halloween. It is a blessing that they do not celebrate Thanksgiving Day here as well. I don't think I could handle that. During Advent, the children roam the streets again, singing Christmas carols outside people's homes, at dusk and after darkness falls, hoping to receive gifts of food or money. Some quite unusual renditions of "Jingle Bells" and "I'm dreaming of a white Christmas" can be heard outside our fence, often as we are heading off to bed. Another practice, of Spanish origin I believe, is the tradition of attending the Misa de Gallo. This is an early morning Mass (4 am) which is celebrated on nine consecutive days leading up to Christmas Day. So each morning from 16<sup>th</sup> – 24<sup>th</sup> December, the bells will toll out over Hilongos at 3.30 am, reminding all and sundry to get up to the Church for this Mass. The Churches are crowded out, and often people will bring their own small plastic chair, to sit in the aisles, or even outside the Church. The belief is, that if you are present for the nine consecutive 4 am Masses, your particular wish will be granted to you. This will be my third Christmas here in the Philippines, and even though I have managed some of the Misa de Gallo masses in the previous two years, I have not yet been able to summon the stamina to attend nine in a row. Maybe that is why my wishes have not ..... Anyway, let's not go into that now.

Some two or three weeks ago, many people in the Philippines (and the world) were shocked by an act of violence in the Province of Maguindanao on the southern island of Mindanao, in which 57 people were murdered, as they made their way to the Provincial capital, to register for next year's elections. Since then several members of a powerful Muslim clan have been arrested, including the Province Governor, and his son who is a local mayor. It is difficult for us, to try to understand how the temptation to remain in a position of power, with its accompanying promise of financial reward, is so all encompassing, that some people are prepared to commit atrocities on an unimaginable scale, and believe that they will not be held accountable. Often the people responsible for such crimes will have powerful allies, possibly in the government or the military, and this leads to a feeling of impunity. It seems that this time, the act of violence went above and beyond anything witnessed here before, and there appears to be a determination that this time, justice must be properly rendered. Still, there is a lingering sense of suspicion

among members of the media, that somehow the perpetrators will curry enough favour to water down the charges. We will see.

Meanwhile, our school year here in Hilongos grinds on. Since school began in early June, we have nearly completed 28 weeks of school (7.30 am – 5.00 pm each day) , with only one week's vacation. Everyone is exhausted, and hanging out for the Christmas break, which is a 'generous' two week holiday, beginning on 19<sup>th</sup> Dec., before we head off on another 13 weeks of schooling. I should remind you that this is the same throughout the Philippines. It appears to me to be a system that is perfectly designed to promote inefficiency and fatigue, and not be of much benefit for serious learning. Why was it that I did not fully appreciate the simple, four times 10 – week terms that operate in NZ and Australia, with the gentle school hours of 8.30 am - 3.30pm ? The worry is that the situation may become even worse, with more Saturday classes, especially since the results of the National testing have been published. These national tests are held for all 2<sup>nd</sup> Year High School students, and all 4<sup>th</sup> Year High School students. The school which I am a staff member of here, Saint Teresa's School of Hilongos, has managed to score bottom of the league tables in both sets of national tests, out of the eleven High Schools in our immediate environment. Hardly satisfactory. The reasons are myriad, and one needs to keep in mind simple statistics, such as (just to mention one) the fact that the teachers at STSH are paid a salary which is 36% of the salary of an equivalent teacher at the government schools. Pointing out deficiencies is easy enough to do; creating solutions that could truly make a difference, is much more challenging.

On the community front, Carl, Denis and Paul will travel to Kabankalan on 21<sup>st</sup> Dec, to join up with Rod and John, to celebrate Christmas, returning to Hilongos on 28<sup>th</sup> Dec. I am planning a very quiet Christmas here in Hilongos, but will get the chance to witness for the first time, the Hilongos Fiesta Day, held on 22<sup>nd</sup> Dec. each year. On 11<sup>th</sup> January, we will farewell both Denis and Paul back to Australia, as their time of six months with us, comes to an end. I would like to thank both of them for being a vital part of the community here during that time, and for entering whole-heartedly into the local environment. I am sure that they will take away special memories of their time in the Philippines.

Wishing all a happy and peaceful Christmas.

Frank Perkins