

First and most importantly; this is a reflection shared at Christmas time and therefore needs to be entertaining as well as informative. We wish you all a happy and Holy Christmas from the Edmund Rice Brothers of Hilongos (cfc) and wish that the Infant Jesus will be a source of great hope to you all. It is a great time for the children all around the Philippines and Mary, the mother of Jesus, is aware of the love you have for children and the way you cherish and care for them. *“As often as you do it to the least of my little one; you do it to me”* Said Jesus, after his disciples tried to separate them from him. He said to them *“Let the children come to me”* which is the title of a well know hymn sung at the Children’s Mass every Sunday here in Hilongos and of course the children just love singing it. We have been in your midst here in Hilongos for nearly nine months and have been in the Philippines all of 15 months, certainly enough time to be impressed with what we have seen. This talk is prepared for The *Hilongos Women’s Catholic League*, who is a group of Catholic Women dedicated to serving the community in Hilongos and have earned our respect in the short time we have been here. If I were to explain to my friends in Australia what these women do I would need more time than I have given myself so let’s just say God knows of their good works and is well able to reward them a hundredfold. *“God will not be outdone in generosity”*

Brief History:

I am a bit of an historian and certainly I love reading history, so the historic sites of Hilongos captured my interest first and had me fascinated. As we all know, Hilongos is part of the Maasin Diocese and is lucky enough to have four secular Priests serving the spiritual needs of its 35,000 Catholics. Hilongos is one of the oldest established settlements on Leyte west coast. The story told is that in the 1100s Amahiwan, an Ilongo from Iloilo conquered neighbouring barangays on Leyte’s western coast and extended his territory to the present limits of Inopacan, Hindang, Bato and Matlom. He formed a settlement and named it Hilongos, because its inhabitants were Ilongos. In 1710 the Jesuits created a residence in Hilongos and the Parish is said to have been declared in the year 1737, but in 1768 the Jesuits ceded the parish to the Augustinians who in turn were forced to hand it over to the secular clergy in 1784. Hilongos boasts a bell tower that has become an important symbol for the Hilongos town and goes back to the Spanish era and is attributed to Don Leonardo Celis-Diaz. The belltower and parts of the old church or fort are still

standing today and allows any visitor a glimpse of its past. Tradition has it that Hilongos was saved by the appearance of a white lady (presumably Mamma Mary) with sword at the ready defending the local people from the pirates of Mindanao. On seeing the apparition they turned around and fled. What remains standing is a reminder of Hilongos' colourful past and it helps gives the town its charm.

The town of Hilongos:

After nine months in Hilongos it is a good time to feed back to our friends how I see Hilongos and its people and share with you my experiences and impressions of this little town nestled between the mountains and the sea on the mid west coast of Leyte. My first impression is one of wonder and to a certain extent shock. Let me explain by saying that the sights I see and the life style I experience are nothing like what I was familiar with at home in Australia. *Perth Western Australia* is a comparatively new, modern and wealthy City with its skyscrapers and a population of a million people, who owe their prosperity to the mining boom to its north as well as a prosperous Primary Industry. When we say it is the city of the rich we really do mean rich when compared to life here on Leyte and their houses are more like castles than homes compared to what Hilongos has to offer. A sharing of this world' goods, is the real issue and the Australian people have an obligation to see this. If only a small part of this wealth was shared we would see a difference in our world.

Hilongos is just a small village (No skyscrapers here) which depends on farming, fishing and small business for its livelihood. This is not to say that the Hilongos people are in any way destitute or not enjoying the basic standards of living which any Filipino town would expect. Hilongos is an industrious and busy little town and its people are happy and contented with their lot. However they are without the amenities that a big city has to offer. Even though it lacks the presence of a big bank or a large shopping centre or even any worthwhile industry, I would say it is well governed and well established with small shops and business trying and make their way. New small businesses are popping up which indicates growth and a certain prosperity, though I use this word reluctantly, as prosperity implies wealth which I do not see here in Hilongos. If someone asked me to share one good point and one bad, I would not hesitate to say that the generous and happy disposition of the Hilongos people is God's given gift and Gambling and drinking to excess their Achilles heel. It would be

fare to say gambling keeps most of the population relatively poor. The overall impression however is one of wonder and thanks giving for such a wonderful faithful people and a Nation full of vitality and joy. Children make up more than half the population which makes me realise just how many children are running around the streets of Hilongos at any one time. I would like to say more about this later in my reflection.

The Hilongos people:

Hilongos has its share of very poor people and like most of the Philippines, has its well to do also. In the Philippines the average family would have six children and here in Hilongos there are many families with twice that number. For this reason and many others you do not see the wealth that is so openly displayed in Australian Cities where the average is one child per family. The other obvious thing that caught my eye was the types of housing accommodation we see and the contrast between adequate and inadequate. The best description I have of the poor dwellings is the word “hovel” which are certainly very inadequate and my first real shock. The houses of the poor are made of bamboo and Nipa, a type of reed, and look rather smart when first completed but like most buildings made of local material very quickly deteriorate with the harsh weather, to the point where they appear very shabby and certainly don't keep the harsh weather out. The point here is that this demarcation between the haves and the have nots is very clear and very in your face. Many houses are indeed made of bricks and mortar and these would be the houses of those people lucky enough to have jobs or posses property or better still have money coming in from family members living and working overseas. There are no real poor in Perth and I guess the social security system in Australia prevents real poverty. (*Social Security is a Government tool which allows distribution of a certain amount of money to those who have no income. Australia's way of sharing their wealth if you like*) There is no such service in Hilongos and therefore one does see poverty and yes there are people who seem to go without. There are children at our door every day looking for food or money, though very few adults thank God. Despite this food seems to be plentiful enough and no one seems to go really hungry which is also a bit of a surprise to me. At least rice and fish are still affordable and the people's main food source. The food market is the busiest part of town and the people are everywhere. Filipinos on the whole are very generous and share what they have

with those who have nothing and this is wonderful to see. Poor people also find part time work, when it's available, and earn enough to feed their families. You can buy rice for as little as P20 per Kilo. Rice is grown where ever there is a suitable amount of land and water. Water is not a problem and rain is a constant gift the tropics enjoy. Leyte is made up of great mountains ranges running down its centre but there is enough fertile land to grow their rice crops. We live in Barangay Atabay which has a growing population due to the mass migration of mountain people to the town. The NPA was causing great hardship and being a communist group tried to recruit by force which did not go down too well with the peaceful loving people. Now these people live as our neighbours and find things very difficult indeed as there is no work for them to do. They make do with a little fishing and growing what they can around their homes. Many of their children don't even go to school. This has set me thinking that here may be a call from God to help teach these children.

The Filipinos are a faithful people:

Now the most interesting aspect of Hilongos life that has captured my imagination is their faith and their philosophy of life generally. Regardless of their financial situation there is a very strong faith in God and certainly in the Mother of Jesus. Their attitude to life is positive and the obvious openness in the hearts of its people is tangible. Despite their difficulties they are able to ride above all and present a happy and joyful outlook which says "thank you God for everything". It is quite humbling to see this and not to have recognised it so readily in our own people at home who seem to have everything. ***"Blessed are the poor for they shall see God"*** rings in my ears and Jesus really did mean what he said. The Hilongos people do have something of great price and no one can take it from them. They really do see God active in their lives. The Lord can rightly say ***"You are my people"*** and the Hilongos people response may well be ***"You are our God"*** I might finish by stating the obvious that Mary will guide and protect them through every trail. The Christmas message is always the same no matter where you are but it is particularly applicable to the Hilongos folk who have been such a wonderful and friendly people God bless you all. ***"Glory to God in the Highest and Peace to all of good will"***

"SILA MALIPAYONG PASKO SA TANAN"

Brother Peter Thrupp (cfc)