

Reflection 6 – Catholicity in the Philippines

The brief history: The Spanish “Colonised!” the Philippines in middle of the 16th century establishing a foothold after a combination of treaties with those willing and wars with the unwilling. One of the conditions laid down by the Reigning Pontiff at that time was that the Spanish warships were to include Catholic Missionaries on every vessel that sailed. After the establishment of Spanish Civil order the missionaries then were sent out to preach the good news to the people. Many of the native’s rituals and customs fitted neatly enough into the Christian beliefs and feasts which may explain the speed in which the local people seemed to embrace Catholicism. It was not long before the whole of the North and Central part of the country accepted this new teaching as theirs, though not entirely rejecting their own customs and beliefs. The South of the country came under the influence of Arab traders some two centuries earlier and so many were converted to Islam. Any attempt to colonise these parts proved difficult if not impossible, though parts of Mindanao were conquered much later. Even today there still is a big population of Muslims in the southern part of the Philippines. Magellan died at the hands of Lapu-Lapu, a great warrior chief while trying to conquer Cebu, so they certainly did not have it all their own way. Priests are more interested in serving their own flock and teaching both sides to live together in peace these days rather than any real attempt to convert. Respect for each other is the way to any lasting peace.

Today: Within the Philippine Church today the Spanish influence is quite tangible and many of its customs come out of this tradition. Devotion to the Infant Jesus (Santo Niño), Mother Mary and the Saints (Each town has its own patron) is quite extraordinary and this is born out with the many processions and special holy days set aside to honour these holy people. We just don’t see this passionate display of ones faith in Australia in quite the same manner. My feeling is that it is a bit like the old religion of the 50s and 60s at home but this is far too simplistic description and I feel that it may be more accurate to say it is a mixture of Spanish and Filipino tradition and customs melded together to form a very unique way of expressing their faith. Certainly this exuberance came out in the Holy Week ceremonies which we were privileged to participate in.

Holy week: The Easter preparation activities start at the beginning of Lent with the early morning daily Eucharist, processions and many prayer meetings culminating in a nine day novena just before Easter Sunday. Holy Week in the Philippines is really something to be experienced to be believed. We found people dressed up in Roman soldier’s costumes roaming the streets on our first day, apparently looking for Jesus. Thursday saw the twelve apostles dressed in period costumes wondering around town collecting money for the Parish building fund. The regular washing of the feet etc occurred in the afternoon. Friday started with morning Office at 5am, and at 1pm the last seven words were acted

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out with pyrotechnics, and then the 3pm Good Friday ceremonies much like at home. The funeral procession followed in which the whole town participated. The procession with the body of Jesus, which was taken down from the cross after the ceremonies, went to the local cemetery. Jesus on one float and several other floats had Mary and the other women such as Veronica and Mary Magdalene on them. The towns' people who did not join the procession crowded the foot paths to form some sort of a guard of honour. This meant some devout people were in church all day. We tried the all afternoon session which was enough excitement for one day. Saturday we spent in quiet time together at home. The traditional vigil Mass saw Easter Sunday in and the Dinner with the Sisters in Maasin finalised a busy but reflective first week. All ceremonies were in Cebuano which was a challenge but we were able to follow things quite well.

My reactions: The crowds that attended each service were huge and the devotion of the people quite open for all to see. Religion is certainly alive and well here in The Philippines. So the thought came to me then why are we here. The people certainly don't need converting so we are not missionaries in the old sense. Br Philip Pinto was moved, I believe by the spirit, to invite the Oceania Province to start a mission here for a purpose. I suggest it was to serve the poor and there are many poor people here. Traditionally education is the usual way the Christian Brothers help the poor and we will certainly be doing just that. We are quite excited at the prospect of joining the School community and to this end we were introduced officially to the School on Holy Thursday of Easter week. The whole of Hilongos knows we have arrived and we have already been made aware of their extraordinary generosity with many gifts showered upon us. We have also been made to feel very welcome with a banner on the school gate spelling out that welcome and we thank God and his blessed Mother for the way we have been accepted. The other way we can help is by living a true and authentic religious life being brother to one another and to the people we serve. This may well prove to be the most important aspect of our presence here. We pray that we can live up to these challenges and ask you at home in turn to pray for us as we attempt to introduce to the Maasin Diocese and more specifically to Hilongos the power and charism that is Blessed Edmund Rice. Edmund is known here as we have been incorporated in the Philippines as The Edmund Rice Brothers and it is our hope that one day there will be Filipinos who will be counted among the sons of Edmund.

I end with the prayer we say before sharing a meal with our friends

Ginoo, Bendisyon kining mga pagkaon sa among atubangan ug langini usab kami nga moambit niini. Kini among gipangayo pinaagi kang Jesus among Ginoo. Amen.