

Reflection 7 – Graduation Philippines Style

Graduation has been on our minds a bit lately and it has compelled me to reflect on what it is all about and what part it plays in our lives these days. We have just *graduated* from the MILC School after six months of quite extensive study in the Cebuano language. Now whether this means we are competent in the language or not the *graduation* does mean a passing from one stage to another. We certainly can speak Cebuano in a fashion but we know there is a long way to go before we can communicate in this language with any sort of proficiency. I am told by those in the know that this can take several years or many years depending how serious we are at trying to master it. Each of us, I would guess, are at different levels of competence but at least we have mastered what I would call the basic language skills which will be a solid foundation to the real learning that is ahead of us as we immerse ourselves in the lives of the people of Leyte. The point is that we feel we are moving on or our lives are going to change once again. If you like we graduate from students to active missionaries. I will be criticised by the educational purist, but to my way of thinking, *graduation* has less to do with academic success and more to do with whether we have grown in the interim. If we have not matured a little more and grown in wisdom a little more then in what sense can we say we have graduated? Life is full of steps gradually taken. One must be followed by another as we progress towards that final *graduation*. God alone will be with us at that one. That will be the one that really counts in the end I guess, all the others are just stepping stones.

Arriving here at Hilongos and making a new home here slap bang in the middle of holy week certainly put us under a little pressure but after going to all the Ceremonies we discovered that they were a little more elaborate than ours at home and many new ways of doing things were experienced. The second week was full of *graduations* of which we were guest of honour for Kindergarten Wednesday, Elementary Thursday and High School Friday. By the end of the week we were well and truly able to say we had had our share of *graduations*. Yet for these students it was an important time, a time of moving on to the next part of their lives. The little ones move to elementary, elementary to high school and high school to College or University. Each group of graduates probably saw this occasion as the most important thing to happen in their lives so far. The joy on their faces was heartening to see and I felt they have indeed grown and seemed well prepared to take on the next challenge that life is about to throw at them. I read in the paper this morning that there will be one million Filipino University Graduates hitting the streets in the next few days. That makes me think.

I still remember my own High School and Tertiary *Graduation* even though some 50 years have past and I suspect others can too. There have been many since that one and some how I would like to think that God is with us on this journey especially when times

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get tough as they some times do. It was a time to be recognised, a time to be told well done and definitely a time to celebrate. Each of these *graduations* this week were preceded by the celebration of the Eucharist asking God to bless the graduates as they take on the next step. We prayed that God would continue to watch and guide them. It is a time to reflect and a time to take stock of where you have been and where you are going. Life is full of these types of moments where a change of direction is necessary. Change can some times come easy but most times I have found change a challenge, so what of these young people? Well they seem to be full of youthful exuberance and joyful expectation. The Principal was addressing the little ones as they prepared to go up one by one to the stage to be recognised. Who would like to be an engineer? Who would like to be a teacher? Who would like to be Major of our city? And for each question the whole thirty were putting up their hands. The sky seemed to be the limit. All the six year olds saw a bright and exciting future and who would deny them this? Each group of graduates had their sights set on the next goal and no doubt they felt nothing could stand in their way.

It was Winston Churchill who said “Success is not final... It is the courage to continue that counts” The biggest clap was reserved for a high School graduate who seemed to be a favourite with the whole group. When I asked about this lad I was told that he had great difficulty with his studies and did not look like graduating. The story is that he stuck with it through many failures and finally triumphed. His fellow students recognised his struggle and his willingness to stay and not quit and respected him all the more for it. This quality was more important than winning awards for maths or science. It is what made him a better person that counted and really that’s what life is all about when all said and done, “being the best person we are capable of becoming”

After Graduation there seems to be a need to let off steam, some forgetting what has so painfully been learnt and worked so hard for. I heard one teacher asking “why do they do this when they have been such great students”. It is some thing that has been going for a long time and not just here in the Philippines. The answer must be found in the student’s every day lives. Control is tight at many schools and maybe rules are kept because of fear of expulsion rather than because it’s the right thing to do. Maybe real Christian values need to be not only taught but some how accepted by them as values worth living by. TV has more effect on the learning process than we give credit for and here in the Philippines you will see a TV antenna above the poorest homes. What ever the answer I believe it goes back to what I said in the first paragraph, namely, “Success is not gauged by the number of awards one wins but rather whether the student has grown a little in wisdom and self knowledge”. When can we really say a person has graduated? Is it when he passed a certain exam or is it something more than that?