

Greetings from the Philippines

This update of activities and happenings is well overdue. My apologies for that. It was originally hoped to publish some thoughts in March, but suddenly it is May. Who is to blame for such a shoddy state of affairs? I place the responsibility squarely on the shoulders of some primeval combination of daylight saving, global warming, Japanese whaling, proportional representation and under-arm bowling. Possibly some other nefarious activities are also involved. Be that as it may, life continues to be busy and varied for the two Edmund Rice Christian Brother communities of Kabankalan and Hilongos.

February heralds the coming of the warmer weather, as the sun moves northwards. It was over the equator on 21st March, and with both communities being only 10 degrees above the equator, it does not take long before summer's searing heat brings its usual challenges, especially for a Dunedin boy (sorry, old boy), used to the gentler climes found 46 degrees below the equator. June, July and August can be very trying, with the build up of humidity to go with the 34 degree temperatures. These are also the months when the typhoons begin again, although mercifully we have really only suffered one significant such storm in our two and a half years in Hilongos.

The Philippines faced a nation-wide challenge on the 10th May as people voted in the Presidential Elections. Politics spark all sorts of passions in many countries world-wide, and the Philippines is no different. The colourful and noisy election rallies that have been in evidence since February help to keep the tension simmering. It is a massive task for the country to organise and run a smooth and fair election for its 92 million citizens. It is not unknown for elections (especially local body elections) to be clouded in controversy arising from corruption, payment for votes, missing ballot boxes etc. It is to be hoped that this election was free, fair, valid and peaceful this time. It is the least that the people deserve.

Holy Week and Easter was a time of religious fervour in the Philippines. Many of the Filipino people at this time return to their home towns and provinces to commemorate the events of Jesus' passion, death and resurrection. This is very much a family affair. Consequently the normal population (50,000) of a town like Hilongos swells for the week. (If you are familiar with 'wall to wall carpet' then 'wall to wall people' may give you a sense of what it was like) College students return home from the cities, and people working overseas will also try to spend some quality time with their families. No wonder there were so many faces in the Church and around town that I did not recognise. The Stations of the Cross on Good Friday were held at 4 am. Somewhat early I would have said, but the usual time in the Philippines. I anticipated correctly that seating space in the Church would be at a premium for the 3pm Good Friday liturgy, so I arrived thirty minutes early. The Church was crowded, and even more were to gather outside as the liturgy progressed. The adoration of the cross itself took

over an hour. However, I experienced a sense of rejuvenation to witness such a large number of young people happily flocking to participate in the many and varied Church events of Easter. The only downside was that I needed to travel by ferry from Hilongos to Cebu City (four and a half hours), on Easter Sunday. Apparently this is one of the worst days of the year to travel internally in the Philippines, as thousands of others are also trying to travel, as the Easter break ends on that day. Fortunately I managed to obtain one of the last seats available on the largest ferry that sails from Hilongos.

The school academic year ended at the beginning of April with the usual ceremonies of Recognition (Prize-Giving), and Graduation. However, the long summer break of eight weeks does include six weeks of summer classes for those students who did not do enough to pass their respective year levels during the 41 week school year. Several of our teachers are back to school again to teach the summer catch-up classes, thereby giving them a total of 47 weeks of teaching in a calendar year. Fortunately I ruled myself as being unavailable to teach summer classes, and headed back to New Zealand for a holiday. Both Rod and John in Kabankalan also took the opportunity during this end of school year time, to spend a few weeks in Australia. Meanwhile in Hilongos, Carl has continued to support the providing of classes for “out of school youth” which has been organised by Felma Lina, an energetic and creative lady whom the Brothers first met when Peter Thrupp chose her to teach at the summer school classes for children who had dropped out of the education system, back in 2009.

Finally, to finish with a couple of examples from the “How about that” column:

1. Whilst meandering around the stores in Cebu City, I noticed that one could buy both altar breads and altar wine, from the local liquor store. Talk about a “one-stop” shop.
2. I accompanied our Grade 6 class (12 year olds), when the students went on their Recollection Day (Retreat Day), last January. The students certainly got their money’s worth with the activities including an opening liturgy based on the Bible, then Rosary (kneeling down), followed by Stations of the Cross (30 minutes), lecture input, Bible sharing, and finally Confessions followed by Mass. I challenge any class in Australia or NZ to equal that!

That’s all for now

Frank Perkins