

## **Philippines September 7<sup>th</sup> -18<sup>th</sup> 2022**

By Jean Kyle

When Father Stephen asked me to speak about my recent trip to the Northern Philippines, I wondered how best to do this without any visual aids. After some thought I decided to use the questions I have already been asked and to try to answer them.

### **Why the northern Philippines?**

The Diocese of New Westminster have partnered with the Diocese of the Northern Philippines for 6 years now, Bishop Melissa Skelton visited there in 2017 with her husband and Venerable Douglas Fenton. We have been praying for Bishop Brent Alawas and the parishes of St. Agnes of Rome Mission and St. Augustine of Canterbury Mission every Sunday for several years without knowing much about them. Bishop Brent is now the Prime Bishop (Archbishop) and his successor Bishop Benny was consecrated during our visit.

### **How did you get invited to go?**

On August 16<sup>th</sup> I received a text from Shannon Muir saying, "A cool opportunity has come up. Let me know when we can talk!" A member from the party of seven had had to cancel due to personal reasons and a replacement was being sought. Shannon was unable to fill the gap but suggested that I might. I had to make a quick decision. So, without any concrete information I said yes.

### **Who made up the Party of seven?**

Bishop John Stephens and his wife Ruth. Archdeacon of the diocese The Venerable Douglas Fenton Rev Philippa Pride presently priest at St. Helen Surrey, Rev Helen Dunn Priest at St. Clements, Elizabeth Ferguson from St. Frances in the Wood and myself. May sound like it was a pretty formidable group but turned out to be one that was very supportive of each other and a lot of fun

### **How did we travel?**

We left Vancouver airport at 2.a.m. on September 7<sup>th</sup> and flew via Taipei to Manila. The journey took 16 hours which included a two hour lay- over in Taiwan. The time difference is 15 hours plus a day so we finally arrived in the morning of September 9<sup>th</sup>. We were met by a driver called Lloyd who was to be with us throughout our trip. He drove us to the Central Office of the Anglican/Episcopalian Church of the Philippines. The temperature was 30 degrees, and we were all very tired but managed to visit the grounds of the Seminary, a very beautiful church and listen to a talk by attorney Floyd the chancellor of the university. We also met Shara who also travelled with us throughout our journeys.

### **Where did you go from Manila?**

After a very welcome sleep in a comfortable Hotel in Manila we set off in a minivan on a 12 hour road trip to Bontoc in the Mountain Province. Bontoc is the capital of Mountain Province and was to be our base for most of our adventure. The population of Bontoc is 24 thousand and the city borders both sides of the Chico River. It is surrounded by beautiful, forested mountains and has an Anglican Cathedral and an interesting museum. Both Manila and Bontoc are on the northernmost Island called Luzon. Our base was the New Bontoc Hotel which was very basic by North American standards but clean and relatively comfortable.

### **How did you meet our partner -Priest?**

On our first Day in Bontoc after a visit to the cathedral and the Museum we went for lunch to a local restaurant. We were originally met there by 2 female priests called Elvie and Liobo who told us who we would be partnered with. I was told Padi Rafael and that he was known as the Joker, and I would be looked after very well. Both of these statements proved to be true! Padi Rafael Lomong-oy is 37 years old He is married to a teacher and has 2 daughters who he describes as future ECW members (Anglican church women) He is the priest of 3 Churches St Agnes, St. Augustine and the Mother Church of St Thomas which is partnered with St Thomas Vancouver. He has been a priest for 9 years and spent that time at these 3 parishes doing serves at 8.00 and 10.30 a.m. and an afternoon service at 3.00 at St Augustine. Rafael explained that he was originally hired for a 5-year period and was then given another term as his Parishioners asked him to stay and the Bishop agreed.

### **What are the Churches like?**

The three that I visited were all different. St Agnes was the result of an ABCD project. This stands for Asset Based Church Development and is very popular in the Mountain Province. A village gets together and looks at assets such as land, labour and materials and puts in a proposal to the Diocese. The Diocese examines the assets, and an architect draws up plans which are then scrutinized by an engineer who also looks at the prospective site. Once the plans are passed the people of the village pour foundations and erect wooden scaffolding and set out to build their own church. Women do much of the work including welding and carpentry. Many of the men look after the farms which have no mechanization. All three churches were either up or down a steep incline and were reached by many steep and overgrown steps. Absolutely no parking anywhere nearby. St. Augustine's could only be reached from the road by walking down to the river, crossing a swing bridge that was very rickety and then climbing many more steps. It is the upstairs of a large, old building and the lower floor is rented to another business. I did not go inside but took a picture and met two of the Parishioners.

The church I attended on the Sunday morning was St. Thomas. It is a simple but lovely building and has a large congregation including many children. The service was very similar to ours although the readings and Gospel were in Igorot (the language spoken in this area) and not Tagalog. The priest read the letter from the Archbishop of Canterbury which was the official notice to the Anglican church of the Queen's death. I was then asked to talk about our Church. I had spent the previous night in the Rectory in the company of three women from the vestry, as Padi Rafael and his family live in Bontoc. The rectory was a

very simple concrete building with a corrugated metal roof. Every window looked out onto steep hillside covered with fruit trees and other lush vegetation. I was served three delicious meals while staying at the rectory and was treated as a special guest which meant that two chickens were killed outside the open door and then brought in to be plucked before going into the pot. All the food is fresh, organic and locally raised or grown.

### **What happened on the day of the new Bishop's consecration?**

We met at the cathedral ready for our instructions. The courtyard was full of people who were having breakfast although we had previously been to a restaurant for ours. Police were directing traffic in the city so that the streets were clear for the procession. Our group were given a sign which read the Diocese of New Westminster and Elizabeth and I carried it for the 40-minute walk around the city. It was very hot, and we felt sorry for our clergy who had to wear their vestments. The day was a holiday for the people of Bontoc, so the streets were lined with the well wishers and many people taking photographs. It brought back memories of Bishop Melissa's consecration in Vancouver. Once we returned to the Cathedral were directed to our seats. Bishop John was at the front with his wife Ruth and was part of the ceremony and the rest of our party were a few rows back but had a good view. The service was similar to our Canadian equivalent, but the offertory certainly was very different. Money was collected in baskets and taken to be blessed, but this was followed by many villagers who took up rice, potatoes, fruit, and vegetables and even a duck which poked its head out and looked around.

Much of these offerings from the local people were carried on their heads and placed in front of the altar by people wearing their traditional dress. Woven skirts for the women and loincloths by the men both of which were woven by hand using a yarn in mainly red, black, and gold. Many priests were present from both the north and south regions of the Philippines and it was interesting to see how young many of them were and to see many young women. At the conclusion of the service the congregation went in twos to be blessed by Bishop Benny.

### **Where was your second homestay?**

The day after the consecration we travelled further north to BUTBUT Proper to attend a confirmation for 14 young people. This time because our party was larger we went in three separate vehicles. If we thought that the roads were bad between Manila and Bontoc we hadn't seen anything. We had been told that the journey would take about two hours, but it actually took four after many exciting incidents such as a rockslide where one of the trucks got cut off from the rest of us for twenty minutes while they cleared the road. Philippa and I were in a pick-up with two priests and we were interested to see several women with large sacks climb in the back in one of the villages. We had also given a ride to two young priests who were going to another village and who jumped out at one point to add some timber to a rickety bridge before we were able to cross. Butbut proper is in Kalinga province and is 4,000 feet above sea level. Elizabeth and I were billeted together as many of the houses were extremely difficult to access due to steep terrain. We stayed with a delightful woman called Rebecca, her second cousin who was in her final year of a degree in forestry and two of Rebecca's children. Her husband was away at a funeral of a well-known man from a neighbouring village and her older daughter was at a boarding

school. On our arrival we were taken to the church and fed before the confirmation took place. This was Bishop Benny's first confirmation, so he was very happy to have the support of our Bishop John. The whole village seemed to turn out for the event and the party afterwards included singing, traditional dancing and gong playing. We each were encouraged to dance and as a prize were presented with gifts of traditional costumes.

### **What was the food like?**

The food was plentiful and included a lot of rice. The local people eat rice at every meal, and it is the main crop that is grown in the Northern Provinces. Coffee is also grown as are potatoes and many other vegetables and fruits. We saw many pigs and chickens as well as goats and a few cows. I was dismayed to find out that dogs are also on the menu but assured that they do not eat their pets! There is very little refrigeration and meat is sold in the street and just displayed on tables. The area is also known for the muscovado cane sugar which is added to coffee and tea and used for baking. I ate snails for the first time, and I don't think that they could be called escargot!

The people were very generous, and we had to eat wherever we went even if that added up to seven meals a day. We learned to pace ourselves and ate small portions. One morning we went to Bontoc Market for breakfast and ate very large pancakes with condensed milk as a replacement for maple syrup. Sometimes we ate in church buildings that were being constructed or renovated following earthquakes and typhoons, which are fairly common in that part of the world. Whatever the circumstances there was always singing and always a meal.

Rice is grown the year round and planted on terraces on the sides of mountains. Some of the terraces are 2,000 years old and are World Heritage sites. These are the ones where the terraces are supported by dry stone walls.

The emblem of the EDNP is a shield with the words *Shalom Beharim* meaning Peace in the Mountains!

The churches, which are well attended are very important to the villagers and really act as community centres. More churches are being built and the congregations are growing. There is little competition as television and other entertainment is not readily available although many people have cell phones. The EDNP has recently celebrated their golden jubilee and their motto is keep the Faith Alive and Aflame. I felt that this was what was actually happening and that the people were enthusiastic and joyful in trying to achieve this.

I returned home and have felt unsettled as I look around and wonder why we have so many possessions but still feel that we need more? The peoples of Mountain Province appear to be happy with their lives and have a very strong faith. It was certainly a wonderful experience to have a small insight into their way of life.

*Jean Kyle*