

APA Philippines Visit - Week 2 - Fr. Paul Rivard

Tuesday morning, as we began to head towards Tarlac north of Manila, we stopped in Mamburo, 45 minutes down the road at the house where one of the land donors for St Andrew's Church in Paluan was staying. We had an early lunch there, and Bishop Haines blessed the house. On the road towards Abra de Ilog, where the ferry was, we discovered that there would be a nearly 2 hour wait before the ship could take us back to the main island of Luzon. This would put us at our final destination after 10 PM. Nevertheless, when we finally arrived, we were greeted by the family of Deacon Ryan and they fed us a meal of fish and vegetables and rice, Filipino staples.

On Wednesday, with only a few hours left to travel to La Union where St James the Greater Church awaited us, we took an easy morning after breakfast and began our travels again in about noon. On this morning off, we managed to find Bishop David some proper tea at a roadside coffee stand and a fancy iced taro bubble tea for me - not so proper. The road trip to La Union began again after lunch and we arrived at the church at around 4:30. With a tour of the finished construction and greetings from Minerva, the daughter in law of Juanita, the land donor and matriarch, the church broadcasted a rosary service over the sound system at 6 and we had evening prayer at 6:30.

On the drive that afternoon, I had been speaking with Fr. Alex about the wonderful hospitality and culture of friendship in the Philippines. Everyone seems to know everyone, and people frequently stay at each other's houses, even for extended periods of time all over the country. That night, the second lesson of Evening Prayer was from 1 Peter where the saint encourages Christians to be hospitable to one another. Again it was confirmed that God was with us on this journey.

The evening ended with an invitation to an outdoor birthday party of one of Minerva's family members. Though the people are very poor, children ran about playing exuberantly, youth and adults mingled joyously, and the elderly were carefully tended to and shown great honor all while the karaoke machine accompanied loud singing of Tagalog pop songs. Though the event was a birthday party for someone else, the Filipino hospitality shined through again as these visiting clergy were given seats of honor. The birthday girl somehow didn't seem to mind being upstaged as everyone insisted that we eat before the rest of the family and friends.

Thursday would involve travel to the episcopal see of the local Roman Catholic bishop who agreed to meet with us to discuss the

encyclical letter that was issued in opposition to the APA in Mindoro. By this time it was beginning to seem that the letter was backfiring since Facebook comments of those who attended the liturgies at St. Andrew's were so positive, and some had commented that they had not seen a service so orthodox and catholic since they were children. Others, who the Bishop of Mindoro Occidental had forbidden from helping us, decided to help us anyways, donating chairs and expressing support. Still more, who were asked to stop posting pictures of the APA events because it "hurt the feelings" of some local Roman priests, continued to post. This is a very Facebook oriented culture here and everything is posted immediately as a matter of course. The letter has also accidentally provided free publicity, whereas once we were unknown in Mindoro, now every Roman parish in the western half of that island has heard we are there, and no doubt every Roman bishop in the whole country has heard at least something about the APA's ministry which is microscopic in comparison to the Roman Catholic presence.

We journeyed to San Fernandino for our appointment with Bishop Daniel Presto, and as evidence of the familiarity of our clergy with the local community, Fr Alex immediately recognized two nuns who were waiting in the lobby, and who were excited to see their friend. They listened intently to his explanation of our reasons for visiting the bishop here, and about the Anglican presence in the area.

In a short while we were speaking with Bishop Presto and experienced an entirely warm, cooperative, and supportive welcome. Together we shared our concerns for reaching people with the gospel in "far flung" regions of the area, and agreed that the enormity of the task cannot be accomplished when the people of God expend energy quarreling with ourselves. We especially agreed on our concern for reaching the younger generation who are typically enthralled with technology, complain of boredom, and often neglect their faith. He offered wise advice for how to proceed with the opposition encountered in Mindoro and acknowledged that the official position of the Roman church is one of ecumenicism and cooperation rather than competition. After this encouraging meeting we returned to St. James the Greater Church in La Union with spirits uplifted and ready for Evening Prayer and a light supper before the night's rest.

Friday's main event was the blessing of a grotto dedicated to Saint Mary, which was on the property of Minerva's mother-in-law, and a part of their family complex. It was mostly women of the community who gathered for the ceremony as the men were at work. Bishop David offered

the blessing as the women and other clergy stood around behind with candles lit. As per usual, the short event was followed by a light meal where again, it was insisted that the clergy eat first. Surrounded by the women of the community however, Bishop David and I insisted that this time, they follow the tradition of “ladies first,” which was not as warmly received a suggestion as we thought it might be. When we tried to point out that in America the clergy are often the last to approach the food table at parish gatherings, our comment was met with no response. When the Filipinos wish to honor their clergy with food, they really insist on it! Of course, we acquiesced. “When in Rome...” After we returned to the parish for Evening Prayer, we discovered that another meal awaited us there. This one would have to be light.

Earlier in the day, during some down time, I had been reading about Liberation Theology in preparation for the resuming of our Sunday School class at St George’s about Christian Theologies of Salvation. In those pages the author insisted that material poverty was “evil” and a “violation of God’s will.” Bishop David and I discussed how this can only be partially true at best since the scriptures so often speak with disdain for the rich, and with high regard for the poor. While material poverty is no doubt the result of many of the worlds evils, we could not help but connect the bubbling joy of these who surrounded the blessing of the grotto dedicated to Saint Mary with the words of the Magnificat recited in the Evening office. Saint Mary’s prayer exclaims, “He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble and meek. He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away.”

Saturday featured an important service at St James the Greater in which the church was consecrated and dedicated by Bishop Haines, the Eucharist was celebrated, and a feast was offered for the entire community. With around 200 people filling first the church and then the surrounding area outside, the liturgies proceeded splendidly and were followed by another several hundred photos many of which were immediately posted to Facebook pages or passed around through Messenger. St James the Greater Church has become a spiritual center of this “far flung” place and with so many children playing in the courtyard after the service and through the banquet, Bishop David and I commented about how blessed these children would be to almost literally “grow up in the church.”

Sunday morning’s worship began early at 8 AM and I was blessed to serve as celebrant for the Mass. Father Joel preached and Bishop Haines administered confirmation to 16 adolescents as we enjoyed a slightly

shorter and less sweltering service in the morning temperatures. We bid farewell to some special guests to La Union who had travelled from another of our churches in Masoc, Nuevo Viscaya, a driving journey of 8 hours. Amie Wayaz, the land donor there, travelled with several others from St Joseph the Worker, the first of our established parishes in the Philippines.

That evening we returned to a nearby neighborhood to celebrate yet another mass, this time outdoors and under a tarp attached to a giant tree. As per usual, a meal followed, lovingly prepared by thankful communicants. This last would be our final service before our departure the next day. The Bishop and I both made speeches to address those present with words of farewell, encouragement and blessing.

Monday was spent preparing for a departure. We're about to arrive at the airport now!

