

Father Steve Baumbusch, PIME

Philippines



I began my missionary work in the Philippines in 1998, serving in the town of Columbio, in the province of Sultan Kudarat, on the southern island of Mindanao. The people there got a kick out of the fact that I come from Columbus and ended up in Columbio – just a change of two letters. There, the name comes from a tribal Filipino word for a tree indigenous to the area.

It's kind of out in the boondocks, in the foothills of the mountains, about one-and-a-half hours (by car) from the nearest town of any size, and about three hours from what we would call a city. The population of Columbio is about 15,000, with 50 percent Christian, 30 percent Muslim, and 20 percent tribal Filipino.

As a result of 400 years of Spanish colonial rule, the Philippines is the only Christian country in Asia, and Catholics make up well over 90 percent of the population. The Catholic faith is thus deeply rooted, in one sense. Yet, as is the case for people everywhere, there remains a need for deeper understanding and commitment.

The major expressions of the faith continue to be the popular devotions to which the people are very attached: statues, processions, fiesta, et cetera.

More recently, within the past 20 to 25 years, the Catholic Church in the Philippines has been committed to the basic ecclesial community (BEC) model.

In each village, groups of families make up a BEC. They gather together for the weekly Scripture and Communion service led by the lay catechist, for the monthly Mass, and other opportunities for prayer and sharing. Essentially, the BEC is the way of “being Church” in the Philippines.

As opposed to a large parish experience, which can be virtually anonymous, the BEC is intentionally kept rather small, so that the people come to know one another well and can share deeply about their experiences in the light of the Gospel.

Particularly in times of tension, violence, and oppression (for example, during the martial law years here under Marcos), the BEC offers a chance for solidarity, mutual support, and just trying to make sense of what is going on. It can also be a vehicle for community organizing among the poor, in order to work together to better their condition.

A lot of my work in Columbio involved going to different villages where the BEC communities were already existing, as well as establishing several new ones. A major part of the focus was outreach to the unchurched and unsacramented among those who are already baptized.

For many different reasons, a large number of Catholics remain inactive. For some, this is due to geography. They live in rather isolated areas, distant from the chapel of the BEC to which they belong. For others, the reasons might be more personal: living in “irregular unions” or some difficult experience in the past.

To reach those in the first situation, we were able to establish six new BECs, which will have their own chapels, leaders, and regularly scheduled Masses.

An ongoing challenge is the promotion of unity among the different BECs. Certainly, the beauty of the BEC model is its focus on the grassroots level, and enabling individuals to achieve a good self-identity as Christians within their own local community.

However, there can be a danger as well: that each local community might become inwardly focused, without a sense of connection and unity with the other communities that make up the parish as a whole.

Instead, of course, we are called to be one. Even though there are different tribes, different languages, different customs, different economic levels, our unity with one another is itself a sign of the kingdom of God.

So we always tried to promote opportunities for interaction to find different ways to express this unity: mutual help, especially in times of economic hardship; shared liturgies; invitations to respective fiestas, and so forth.

In 2005, I transferred from Columbio to Mary Queen of Apostles Parish in the metro Manila area. What a change that was! From rural to urban, from mountain foothills to sea level, from a small parish to a huge one, from simple country folk to city dwellers, it could not be more different.

At Mary Queen of Apostles, the assistant pastor and I have been ministering to somewhere around 120,000 parishioners.

It is hard to be exact, with the transient nature of the people – many coming in from the provinces to find work in the city, others returning to the provinces or moving overseas –

and the large number of squatters, those without titled land or homes.

As can be imagined, with so many folks, much of our time is taken up with traditional pastoral work: saying Mass, hearing confessions, sick calls, baptisms, marriages, funerals, blessings of all kinds.

In addition, there are many, many groups, movements and organizations in the parish, so a lot of meetings, workshops, and seminars.

In addition to the main church, which seats about 1,000 and has four Sunday Masses, there are six chapels in the outlying areas, where Mass is celebrated each Sunday. In the largest of those, there are three Masses on Sunday. That makes for 12 Sunday Masses, and we have two religious-order priests who come each Sunday to help out.

There are two other chapels which have a monthly Mass on Saturday evening. Four of the Masses are in English, while the rest are in Tagalog. We also celebrate lots of baptisms every Saturday in the main church and every Sunday in the main church and that large chapel.

The areas of the outlying chapels are mostly squatter zones, or at least formerly so, since, in recent years, initiatives have taken place to provide titles and some kind of basic services for the residents.

They remain areas of deep poverty, cramped housing, and narrow streets crowded with playing children, jeepneys, and tricycles (motorcycles or bicycles with a sidebar).



In regard to social activities, the parish has a Solidarity Center with a free medical clinic every morning and a free dental clinic twice a week. There is a social worker there who handles requests for financial help. In addition, through the Little Angels club, the parish supports more than 2,000 poor children with their education experiences.

A large majority of these are elementary students, with a couple hundred high schoolers and some college students. The kids are sponsored by a kind of foster parent program that PIME (the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions) has in Italy.

So, yes, it is quite a different kind of experience and ministry for me. In fact, I really had to undergo my own emotional paradigm shift about just what it means to be a missionary. Urban mission has its own dynamics and needs that are different, but no less real and pressing than those in the provinces.

Here, besides the urgent pastoral needs of sacramental ministry, I see issues such as loss of human dignity, a sense of isolation in the midst of a crowd, a disconnectedness from family and, of course, all the ills and troubles that come with abject poverty.

It's a big challenge, to be sure. Sometimes it can seem overwhelming. But I have never felt dismayed nor discouraged. There are lots of great people in the parish, full of good will and enthusiasm. And there are lots of great people "out there" as well, giving prayerful support to our missionary endeavors.

Currently, I am doing some sabbatical studies at the Pontifical College Josephinum. I will return to the Philippines in the spring of 2009 to take up my new mission as rector of PIME's theology seminary there.