The Philippines: **A Search for Meaning**

by Skip Schiel

This memorial is dedicated to all those innocent victims of war, many of whom went nameless and unknown to a common grave, or never even knew a grave at all, their bodies having been consumed by fire or crushed to death beneath the rubble of ruins.

Let this monument be the gravestone for each and every one of the over 100,000 men, women, and children and infants killed in Manila during its battle of liberation, February 3 – March 3, 1945. We have not forgotten them, nor shall we ever forget.

May they rest in peace as part now of the sacred ground of this city: The Manila of our affections.

The Memorare Manila 1945

Photo: Skip Schiel

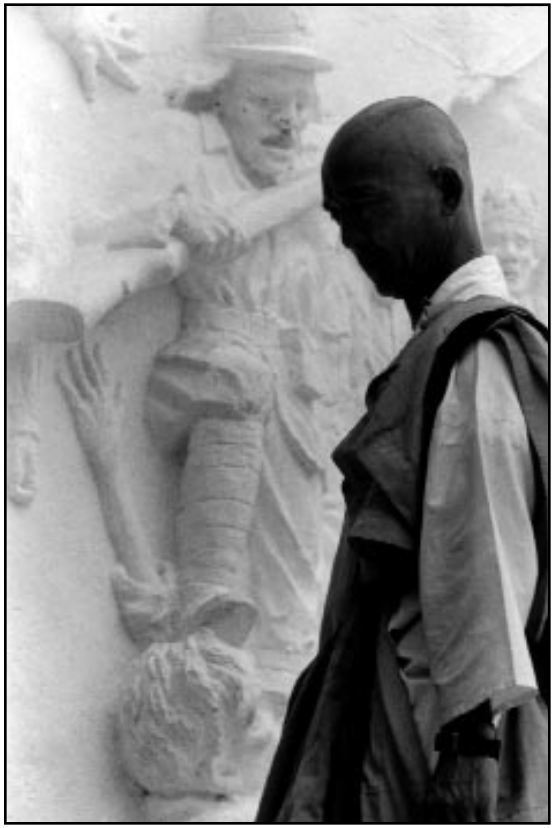

Photo: Skip Schiel

Reverend Sasamori at a Bataan Death March memorial

For many pilgrims, the Philippines was the most difficult leg of the journey. We walked in the high heat of summer, with a schedule in which time and distances were sometimes miscalculated, causing confusions and delays. Many of us knew only a vague history of World War II in the Philippines, dimly related to the United States and Japan (although we were aware that hundreds of thousands had courageously suffered and died during the war here). In our home countries we had little, if any, contact with Filipino people. Many of us were especially disturbed by the environmental ruination we walked through—a result of economic development and the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo. I was especially troubled by the seeming lack of a shared sense of national identity. What has happened in the Philippines, we asked, and how am I and my country responsible? Throughout our journey here, however, we were unselfishly aided, cared for, fed and housed by the generosity of the people and our organizers.

We walked for four weeks, some three hundred miles, on the main island of Luzon, starting at Bagiuo, walking south to the peninsula of Bataan, there to walk part of the Bataan Death March route in reverse—The Bataan *Life* March! Then on to the fortress island of Corregidor, littered with war-ruined buildings, rusting weapons and monuments to the dead amid a surprisingly idyllic and peaceful setting. Finally, we bused to the southern tip of Luzon, Bicol, and walked north to Manila. We fasted and prayed in Intramuros, in the center of Manila, where some 100,000 civilians perished during the last days of the war. We remembered the thousands of U.S. military that had died during World War II, as well as the countless others—Japanese and Filipino, combatants and civilians—that died, not only in World War II, but during liberation struggles dating back hundreds of years.

Filipino organizers put the Pilgrimage themes this way in flyers we passed out to the thousands who came to greet us:

- To call attention to the Philippine internal armed conflict and heighten the concern for and efforts towards its resolution through the peace process. The peace agenda being promoted by advocates as a framework for resolving the conflict will be highlighted.
- To expose and denounce the developmental aggression of transnational and multinational corporations, especially that of Japan and the United States (ironically, the protagonists in the last World War), as this impacts on the South, which suffered the most devastation in the War.
- To focus on the inter-relatedness of peoples, of concerns, issues, beliefs, problems, ideologies, and faiths as a unifying step to confront the scourge of war and in the struggle to preserve life.

A succinct statement of a Filipino perspective in one of the Manila newspapers, *The Expat*, shocked many of the American pilgrims who had little idea of American-Philippine history:

> [Just as the Independence Movement was about to succeed] …the Americans had ideas of their own, and when the Americans defeated the Spanish in a mock Battle of Manila in August 1898, then-President McKinley decided to keep the Philippines, believing Filipinos were not ready for self-governance and afraid other countries would invade the Philippines for themselves.
>
> Aguinaldo and other Filipinos believed otherwise and their guns were soon turned at the Americans, with whom they fought a bloody Philippine-American War for three years, ostensibly ending when Aguinaldo was captured in 1901 by the Americans (there were still pockets of resistance, however, for several years after).
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> For Filipinos, this history is common knowledge, an integral part of their being. For most Americans, however, it comes as a shock to learn there was a Philippine-American War, and that America, the bastion of democracy, fought another country to keep it under [U.S.] rule.
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> For whatever reason, the Philippine-American War is not taught in the American educational system, and most Americans are unaware of a vital part of their history.

A major problem in the Philippines—a legacy of U.S. involvement—is child prostitution. Phillip Sherwell wrote in the *Daily Telegraph,* a Philippine newspaper:

> The South-East Asian archipelago has long been a paedophile haven, where until recently, the worst fate likely to befall a Western sex offender was being shipped home. For 13 years, a lone crusade has been waged by Father Shay Cullen [a Catholic priest] against the sexual predators who abuse the country's children. Police corruption and apathetic politicians reluctant to publicize to outsiders this less than paradisaical aspect of the Philippines have meant that Father Cullen has often been the only one attempting to monitor suspected paedophiles.

In Olongapo, the town that once hosted the Subic Bay Naval Station, Father Cullen founded the PREDA Foundation Human Development Center. As we pilgrims rested there for several days, he told us about his campaign to stop child sex abuse and rehabilitate abuse victims. Several of us visited a residence for orphaned children whose mothers had worked as prostitutes for the sailors at the Naval Station. The children enthusiastically learned from us how to fold peace cranes—a token that might lessen the overwhelming legacy of the base.

Although the Station is now closed, the United States and Japan, through economic influence, continue to control use of the land. How do Philippine indigenous people interpret this? Michael Pangilinan, a young man from a region north of Manila called Pampanga, writes:

> The Kapampangan (someone from Pampanga) is touchy when it comes to the question of land because the question deals not only with an accidental preoccupation but with the deeper question concerning himself, his very being, his soul. When one touches his land he not only touches something he merely possesses; rather, he touches his very being as well.

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Photo: Skip Schiel

Several of us visited a residence for orphaned children whose mothers had worked as prostitutes for the sailors at the Naval Station. The children enthusiastically learned from us how to fold peace cranes—a small gift that might lessen the overwhelming legacy of the base.

The Philippines, a land once thick with forests, has suffered untold desecration. Legal and illegal tree-cutting devastate the rain forest. Multinational companies contract for timber rights and drive indigenous people further into the mountains for subsistence. They would then, themselves, burn forests for cultivatable land. Meanwhile the companies strip the region's virgin forest.

We asked, who buys the wood? Where is the market? We learned that Japan and the United States of America are among the biggest markets. A young woman, close to the indigenous teachings, forcefully explained her people's belief about trees. Each person has a tree as a companion, for life. The tree's spirit entwines with the spirit of the person, so that what happens to the tree happens to the person, and what the person does affects the tree. They are interconnected. Both are sacred.

Deforestation exacerbates the problem of *lahar*—a mix of volcanic ash, sand, and water. I was particularly distressed by witnessing the lahar after it had swamped whole communities. PREDA, the youth service center in Olongapo, was destroyed in 1992 by lahar. Father Shay Cullen guided its rebuilding. Three years later, he wrote in his annual holiday message:

> The greatest on-going disaster is the continuous flows of [lahar] from Mt. Pinatubo, the flows destroying huge areas of the provinces of Pampanga and Zambales. The source of the present on-going disaster is the incredible tonnage of ash and sand that poured from the volcano during the eruption which later settled on its flanks and filled its huge valleys.
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> When the rains come, there is not a tree to hold back the water but it rushes down the slopes mixing the ash and sand like cement and hurls it towards the flat plains below where it quickly fills the rivers and spreads itself further and further from the volcano growing higher by the hour. People fled when they could. Some were swept away, others dragged under by the flowing cement, yet others took refuge on their roof tops where they were rescued by helicopters every year since 1991.
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> When the rains and storms are over, an expansive gray desert lies where once rural towns and villages thrived among the lush green rice fields shaded by towering groves of majestic bamboo. Driving north from Manila, you can still see the roofs of only the tallest buildings protruding from the new desert floor that stretches to the horizon.

We met people displaced by the lahar. We resided overnight in their temporary shelters in resettlement sites, hearing people's stories and sharing songs.

Many of the Pilgrimage themes are contained in a publication by ETHOS, a local environmental organization, calling for a jubilee year in 1998 to respond to the ruination of the Philippine earth. In *The Environment: An Inter-generational Responsibility (A Primer), January 1995* they write:

> Indigenous people in the Philippine Cordilleras have a tradition called *lapat* which prohibits people from entering or using an area for a certain period of time. Among the reasons is to ensure that a plot of field is allowed to rest or lie fallow in order to regain its fertility.
>
> More appropriate at this time of widespread destruction of the Philippine archipelagic environment, and the global environment as well, is to call for [a celebration of] a jubilee year (which has four "R" features—Release of prisoners, Return of the land to original inhabitants, Recall of the debt and Resting of the land). Jubilee is a Judaeo-Christian affirmation of all creation's yearning for restoration and healing, including humans, especially the poor among them. …Jubilee's ecological component—the resting of the land—is an integral, thus indispensable, part of the celebration. Without the return to nature's harmony, renewal would not be complete.

Photo: Skip Schiel

Five months after our Pilgrimage in the Philippines, Frank Houde, one of the pilgrims and a Vietnam War veteran, reflected in a letter to friends and family:

> The Japanese monks were very aware of the brutality of their soldiers (in the Philippines) during World War II and with us other walkers [they] listened to the stories of suffering, atrocity and destruction told by dozens of survivors as we traveled. Along the way we… saw and were told of the scarring left by the American military presence at Clark Air Force Base and Subic Bay Naval Base, …were witness to the effects of economic aggression (that newer form of warfare, sometimes called 'development') particularly by Japan and the U.S.A. …and were witness to the staggering effect of a hundred years of American colonialism/imperialism on the Filipino tribal cultures that has left a people searching for their identity.

Despite our initial unease about walking through the Philippines, most of us were heartened by the experience. I was inspired by the local organizers. They walked with us, helped us shop for food and other necessities, explained fine points of history and interpreted the walk to local people. Most importantly, they set the itinerary and redefined the

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Photo: Skip Schiel

Pilgrims walking through the Anak Bayan neighborhood of Manila

Pilgrimage's mission, providing a more economic and environmental focus. I personally was moved to be with so many young, energetic and joyful people. After what they experienced with us, some of the organizers hope to organize their own pilgrimage in 1998 to commemorate the one hundred years of struggle against occupying powers. The Pilgrimage—the struggle!—continues.

Long after we have completed the tangible portion of the walk, voices echo in my ears. Brennan Delos Reyes, a young man several of us stayed with in a lahar resettlement area, wrote me: "Even though you're far, we can't forget the little hour with laughter, sharing and walking. I want to meet you again someday. We miss you."

Of Peace and Silence

Yes, silence reigns
in this heart of Bicol land.
But silence, they say,
is not always a sign of peace:
the starving children
at the foothills of Isarog
are silent.

And so are the farmers
of the flooded fields
and the fishers
of the murky river
where silenced bodies
sometimes drift.

Indeed, silent is the soul
that grieves in darkness
the muted lips
belying the turmoil from within.

—*Gabriel Hidalgo Bordado,* Naga City, Philippines