

SISTER CLAIRE O'ROURKE

How does one reduce to a sheet of paper the description of an overseas Catholic missionary Sister who entered Asia on a freighter ship which originated in Holland, met its few passengers in Los Angeles CA, and a month later docked in Manila, Philippines? It was September 1958. Sister Claire and her companion had finished a college degree in Chicago a few months earlier, made a quick trip home to New England for a family farewell visit and headed by train across the States from Boston to Los Angeles. It was to be an eight to ten year commitment aka "assignment as a missionary."

To welcome this Columban missionary at the pier was a good friend, a Sister who had finished her PhD in education in Boston and Washington DC. This was the first place to learn this new culture in 90 degree weather because **Manila had 24 hour electricity** and electric fans in every room! A few months later Sister Claire moved up country to work among the very simple and quite ambitious young people seeking a high school education and long hours in classes. Teens can educate/correct and welcome one into their culture feeling they have the upper hand on something and sudden outbursts of laughter urged me along to feel more comfortable during those four years of trial and error both with language and English in the classroom, with what was called "my accented English!" It was their first experience with an American teacher.

Moving 500 kms to the South, to the Island of Mindanao was a different experience. This time one was given the opportunity to study the local language of the South; to move away from the classroom and spend time with the people along the waterfront, who lived in houses on stilts out over the water. It was a walk along a wooden plank that connected with a swinging path out into deeper water. Visiting the sick and burying the dead was a common way one moved into the now not so new Asian lifestyle of the very poor. It was a revelation to experience the upbeat attitude and trust that another day would be better somehow. They managed seemingly to enjoy a positive, patient and quiet approach to life. I returned a few years later to this area, having studied the skills and sensitivity of a Social Group Worker to now train married couples as leaders in helping other couples. Among these gentle and kind Filipinos we grew humbly together in a little greater knowledge of our own giftedness and our call to share with others our own inner spirituality and good relationships as teams. To sit together in the evening in a forgiving moment for the day's failures or unfortunate mistakes was very important for ending the day. This became an important cultural ritual among the couple teams and it was passed on as part of their support of the newly weds in the diocese. A team traveled from parish to parish training other married couples. Eventually, they were invited to travel greater distances to share their team support of couples.

Thus, the Christian community developed a deeper understanding of God's presence in and through each one. Groups continued to grow with the encouragement of the role of the laity found in the Vatican II teachings. Centering Prayer is a natural way for many Asian peoples to find God. Their appreciation of finding quiet space for prayer is a beautiful echo of their culture. A missionary can be enriched working and moving among them.