

THE BOHOL EXODUS

In an earlier email to the Tanjay loop, I mentioned that per his homily, our Tanjay parish priest was reportedly leaving, cutting short his 6 year stint. This was greeted with much jubilation by so many. Alas, it appears to have been an April Fool's joke. This would again make the religious services of the approaching Holy Week especially trying for many of the faithful here.

So when members of the large family clans of the Limbagas, Alcantaras, Quinitis, etc (all inter-related) decided to troop up to a hinterland Barrio of Tayawan, to attend the services of one of their very own, Fr Jun Limbaga, newly assigned priest in the area, we opted to join the group. He is related to Lisa on two sides.

Aside from being also the parish priest's name, Bohol is name of an island with lovely beaches, where many of us have visited. In all fairness, perhaps the clan members would have gone anyway to attend part Holy Week services of Fr Jun, regardless of the Tanjay situation. This makes the subject title of "Exodus" applicable perhaps only to us, but who knows really?

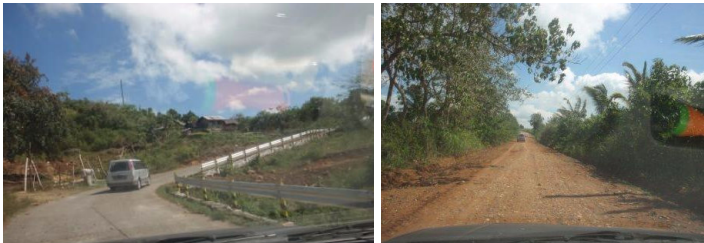
Photo above right shows the location of the barrio. Photos below show the paved and unpaved sections of the back roads leading up to Tayawan.



Google map of Tayawan barrio (upper right), on a plateau, and Bayawan City (lower left). Took 5 hours' drive from Tanjay by van. North is to the right.



A stitched view of the church and the unfinished social hall. The church construction was started 13 years ago, and still is without a ceiling. The rectory is further behind.



We totaled 6 van loads when we all converged there Thursday noon. But only 30 of us from 4 vans stayed overnight for Good Friday. It was quite an experience.

Last year, Fr Jun completed advanced theological courses in Spain, having been sent by the bishop of Dumaguete. After short temporary assignments and vacations in Israel and in the US, he was assigned to Tayawan. Before all that, he was based in Dumaguete in various minor roles. A charismatic speaker, his homilies always keep the congregation in rapt attention, and many a time have moved even non-Catholics to tears. Not surprisingly, the Tayawan congregation hope for an extension of his 6 month assignment.



Fr Jun meeting us. That's his mother's back, in orange.

Tayawan is a barrio of Bayawan City, at the southern end of Negros Oriental, near the border to Negros Occidental. As a matter of fact, the language there already has a distinct mixture of Ilongo. This is the political country of Minyong Teves, that old stalwart, who at nearly ninety years, still wields great political and economic power in the region. For instance, there is a mountain road that cuts across from Bayawan's neighboring town of Sta Catalina to Tanjay, a distance of 49 km. But the road is horrible (took us almost three hours in a rugged 4-wheel drive 2 years ago), and some say it is kept that way to prevent the sugar planters in the area from going over to the sugar mills in Tanjay and Bais. Their choice is therefore the nearby Teves sugar mill at Tulong or those at Occidental.

We took the excellent concrete coastal road, all 150 km, as it looped south through Dumaguete, then west to Zamboangita, Siaton, etc.

We had brought tons of food, already cooked in "calderos" and plastic containers; bread, sandwiches, and also lots of packaged stuff such as canned goods, noodles, etc. Most of it were to be left with Fr Jun and his community.

When we got there almost at noon, the locals also were ready: they had cooked lots of goodies. It was to be a communal meal for all.



The locals cooked right on the ground, using firewood as shown above. They drew water from a covered well, photo at left, with an ingenious two-bucket pulley system that

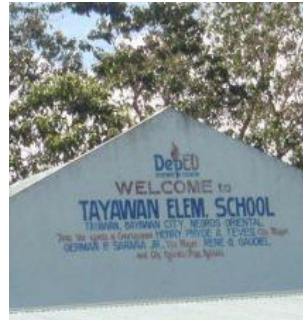
many of the kids in our group found fascinating. But there was piped-in water from their water district, and the pressure was high, as noted in the bath room in the rectory. And there was electricity.



Actually, many of the accouterments of modernism were there. The church had an excellent audio-visual system, as shown in above photo taken during the 4 o'clock mass that day. And there were cells phones, too. Unfortunately, the signal was not that strong in the church area. Some of us had to walk 2 blocks to the barrio's plaza where the signal was stronger, but even that was no guaranty. I just could not get a signal on my iphone. And there was no TV cable or internet service.

While in church, I couldn't help but look at the roof beams and compare them to the Tanjay church where our parish priest had taken out all the supporting 20 roof pillars without consent of the congregation. Yes, I felt much safer here.

After all, at least for the next 20 hours, it served also as a social, sleeping, and worship area. Photo shows local children playing jackstones near the altar. The ID around their necks were "meal tickets" for Fr Jun's feeding program. Later that night, I slept on a pew.



The barrio obviously has an elementary school, and I believe also a high school, and has lots of signs here and there showing slogans. Right photo above is one of my candid shots where I didn't realize what I caught until later: a sign saying "no to prostitution".

Indeed, the community's craving for spiritual guidance can best be exemplified by the stories I got from at least 2 sources. In this area comprising three barrios of about 5,000 registered voters, there are at least 10 churches of different sects and denominations. Years ago, a Catholic priest would make a visit only once a year. So this attracted other "religious" to make their way into the community. One infamous incident involved a pastor in one of those "end-of-the-world" scares some years ago. He convinced his flock that since they would all die, they should give up all their worldly belongings (jewelry, etc) and gather them in a communal urn. This also included the proceeds from selling their livestock. But when the appointed day came, and they found themselves still alive, they also noticed that the urn and the pastor was gone. I am pretty sure this won't happen in Tanjay!

It was the church congregation and services that impressed us most.

For one, they had a very good choir, which really was the entire congregation, perhaps nearly a hundred, and an excellent guitarist. The 4 pm mass was simple and solemn, using the Taize technique, taught by Fr Jun, where simple songs were sung and/or chanted repeatedly, interspersed by silent periods of meditation, with extemporaneous petitions from the faithful, then always followed by the chanting refrain of "Kyrie Eleison". Most moving. It was a far cry from the long, screeching, boring homilies we are used to in Tanjay. The service lasted about an hour and a half, in time for an early communal dinner again, and then later, a program presented by the congregation. It ended with the traditional recessional wherein the sacrament was placed beside the church for adoration, right photo



The dinner had lots of barrio-folk fare: dried fish, mungo, veggies, and the like. We still had lots of adobo and other goodies, too. But the night was just starting. After the program, there would be the sacrament adoration till midnight, then at 4:30 AM, the Via Crucis. It would be just a few hours of sleep for most.

I must back track the story to show clearly these two photos on the right, taken during the mass. Left most photo shows the "twelve apostles" garbed in colored robes. The other photo shows Fr Jun washing and kissing the feet of all of them.



After dinner, I didn't join the others at the social hall to witness the excellent entertainment program of the locals. Instead, I relaxed at a bench in a roofed shack near the well, and could take shots of the scene. On right shows Fr Jun, sitting on the grass, leading the group in prayer and meditation.



Finally, we drifted off to sleep. The more senior ones, such as Fr Jun's mother Helen, and Lisa, commandeered the sole rectory bedroom, with its two beds. Most of the others, including Fr Jun, spread out mats and blankets, set up tents, and made do where ever: on the ground, on the roof of the social hall, in the church, etc. They were a generation or two younger. There must have been about 40 in all. I opted for a pew as my bed. And I came prepared with blanket and pillow, as it was cold.



procession moved from one station to another, day-break came, and the cocks crowed. See photos above.

By my reckoning, it must have been a kilometer and a half total distance. In Jerusalem a few years back, we did the same thing, and it was much shorter, but it was uphill all the way to Golgotha.



Photo above shows a comic irony in that the station where Christ was stripped off his garments happened to have a clothesline of garments for sale also strung up.

I wondered about how our friends in Tanjay fared. Since 3 years back, the parish priest expanded the Via Crucis route to across the river then zigzag back again to the other end of town, a much publicized eight kilometers. Naturally, this made it untenable for most seniors, though he reportedly did say that there is an ambulance always waiting behind.

By 7 AM, we were back in the church. By 8 we were done with breakfast. By 9 we had finished breaking camp, and completed the group pose below.

Then all 30 of us piled in 4 vans and drove home. It indeed was an enjoyable exodus.



As per schedule, by 4 am, we started getting up. See two photos above taken with the camera flash on. The local congregation was already assembling outside. Pretty soon, we all were inside the church with lit candles. The beautiful singing started again, then the procession of the Way of the Cross commenced.



I haven't attended this ritual for many years, but I know that the 14 stations are set at predetermined locations along the way. And we were assured that the total distance was reasonable. As the



Danny Gil <ferngil@aol.com> 26 Apr 2011