

## The Gift the People of Ilin Gave Me

It was a month ago when 28 pilgrims from all over the United States and Canada got together to go on a journey to the Philippines. They were all filled with so much excitement that they will be involved in doing something good specifically to help the poor people in the Island of Ilin, Occidental Mindoro. This will involve a feeding program, witnessing a mass wedding of 40 couples, a medical mission and handing out of solar LED lamps, toys and clothes to its inhabitants. They allotted space in their luggage or reserved a “balikbayan box” to give away to help the people of Ilin.



For in Matthew 25:37-40 it says *“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’*”



I was one of those privileged pilgrims and what I took with me to give to the Island of Ilin was nothing in comparison to what they gave me going home. Upon my return to Chicago, there is not a waking moment that I do not think of their faces. Not the face of need, of hunger and of desperation...but a face with a smile, a face of gratitude for what they have and what the Lord continues to pour out to them...the face of faith...the face of hope...the face of happiness in the midst of poverty. They do not long for what they do not have, they are thankful for what they have, no matter how little and how simple it is.





*In Luke 6:20-21 it says “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.”*



Never again will I turn on a light switch without thinking of them, for the Island of Ilin does not have electricity. The Missionaries of Mary Mother of the Poor (MMMP) in partnership with Watts of Love (founded by Nancy and John Economou) worked hand-in-hand to be able to bring 1000 Solar LED Lamps to the families of Ilin. I was blessed to join the founders in personally handing out these lamps to three of the families there. To my surprise, the first greeting we receive from Nanay Rosalina was “Sino ba naman ako para pag-aksayahan ninyo ng panahon na bisitahin?” (Who am I that you will waste your time visiting me?) We did not leave any family without first praying for them.

The gist of which was “God brought us to you so that you will know how much He cares for you. We do not know you and we do not know where you live, but God does and that is the reason why we are here. He has made us instruments of His undying love for you.” On my last day, I ran into Ofel, Nanay Rosalina’s granddaughter and I put my hands into her face and told her “Physically, you will not see us anymore but I want to let you know, I am leaving my heart here with you and I will carry all of you in mine going back home. I will continue to pray for all of you always!” To this I added, the material things that we have given to you is insignificant, the more important thing for you to remember is that God will never abandon you. He will always provide for your needs as long as you do not forget to pray and talk to Him.



*“Did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?” James 2:5*

Before we left the Philippines, Fr. Fernando shared the good news that the organization “Feed My Starving Children” has committed to provide the 10,000 malnourished children of Ilin food for the next five years. When we told our friends of this, they informed us that they were at Libertyville, Illinois just a week ago, 100 of them volunteering to pack this food.



They chose the Philippines as their country of destination of food. It has come full circle, while they were packing in the US, we were receiving the food in the Philippines. This is how good our God is!

I know I speak on behalf of the 27 other pilgrims when I say, “Thank you very much, people of Ilin for teaching us what life is all about.” It is about family, about caring for one another, about simplicity of life. It is about faith, hope and love. Now, we are all very thankful for all the blessings that the Lord has given us, visiting Ilin Island and meeting you. We thought we came to give, instead we were the ones who received.