

Ikaw ang kusog – You Are My Strength

By Merve Rugenstein Itona

Shhhhh...Listen...

The air is dusty, sour, grey...Can you imagine? There are trucks coming and going: Full of stinking, putrid, rotten garbage. And while unloading, people run, grab the plastics, digging and grubbing. They pick materials to sell, leftovers to eat and things to recycle.

They do not just work on the dumpsite they *live* on it.

How do these people look? Who are they? You cannot see their faces since they try to protect themselves from the sun by wrapping rags around their heads. Many of them are small children. Many are addicted to glue sniffing and alcohol, many are prostitutes, criminals.

Many die young.

Nobody is asking for anything. Nobody is begging. Nobody expects anything. The people on the dumpsite have no hope. We are in Cagayan do Oro, Mindanao, one of more than 7000 Philippine Islands.

In response to what we saw in this garbage dump, a young Swiss police man, a Filipino diplomat, some friends and I created the little foundation "Island Kids Philippines" in June 2007.

We started with four girls. Today there are more than 70 children under our care. We try to offer comprehensive help: education in our own (acknowledged) school—most of the children have never



This child from Cagayan do Oro on the Philippines island of Mindanao lives in a garbage dump. (Photo: Thomas Kellenberger)

before been able to attend classes—; a sheltered home for those not cared for by their family; medical treatment; and spiritual guidance.

We are all working voluntarily: the project is financed by sponsors who support one child every month like a god parent.

We don't want to educate them so that they can go abroad and make money. Our kids are integrated into the work of running the project. They are the ones who help cooking for feeding programmes

and they are the ones who bring the food to the street children, knowing them better than anybody else, opening their hearts, serving them and showing them love in a charitable and true way.

Most of them have never heard about God. Their parents may have been Catholics (like 80 per cent of Filipinos) but the children have no idea about a God who is real, who created them and made each of them special. Even though our goal is not to convert the children, one of our girls, Sharon, told me once with a big proud smile on her face: "I have no parents, but God loves me and he is my father."

The children are self-reliant. They get up in the morning, cook, clean the house and wash their clothes. The older ones teach the younger and, if there is a fight, the host mother intervenes. Every night the children at the shelter gather upstairs under the roof, sitting in a circle. No adult is advising them, they are on their own and decide on their own, when they will start. They pray for each other and then sing off-key and in broken voices a few songs in their dialect like: "Ikaw ang kusog" – "You are my strength".

Shhhhh ...Listen...Can you hear them?

If you are interested in learning more about the project, contact: Islandkids_Philippines@yahoo.com

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Switzerland: religious plurality debated

Controversy in Switzerland over an influx of immigrants from non-Christian faith traditions has focused in past months on whether to allow the construction of minarets on the country's mosques.

In response to the growing wave of intolerance sweeping the country, Swiss theologian Kristin Rossier Buri, has published an opinion piece in *bulletin sek-feps*, the newsletter of the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches. *Update* offers a translation here of excerpts from her article.

"The church has the tendency to be too reticent," a Swiss national elected official told 650 parish representatives of the Reformed Evangelical Church in the Vaud region at a meeting in Lausanne recently.

In his presentation, Luc Recordon urged churches to speak out. "After initially resisting the idea, we now are realizing that the religious dimension of society must be included in the political landscape. The church not only supports the poor but also contributes to peaceful inter-religious relations. This is an important social value."

Developing and maintaining platforms for inter-religious dialogue with other religious communities in Switzerland is one way of taking on this role and contributing to social well-being. At the national level SEK-FEPS is actively involved in Swiss council of religions and the commission of Jewish-Protestant dialogue. Regional

churches too have created specialized ministries for inter-religious dialogue, particularly with Islam.

But at the local level, there are few parishes which realize they can create links with their municipal government and with the neighbourhood mosque.

In order to engage in inter-cultural or interfaith dialogue, we must be able to think outside our normal frame of reference and take a critical look at our own tradition and identity. Learning how to engage in inter-religious dialogue even at the parish level should be a priority for our churches.

Translated by Kristine Greenaway with files from the "bulletin sek-feps"