



Newsletter No. 3, November 2018

By Sara Imperatori / Youth empowerment

A professional interchange with COMUNDO

THE UNLIKELY WANDERINGS OF A SWELSH

The Philippines Chapter



The Lamut Youth creates candles made out of recycled wax.

A year later...

Here we are, a year after that first newsletter where, full of inspiration, I was ready to embark on this adventure. And how do I feel after a year? I certainly feel to have grown both personally and professionally. I don't think to have expected such a hard start, but one thing is certain; during all of this time, I never doubted that here is where I should have landed.

I therefore finish this first year with the child-like curiosity I had when I arrived, and with the added sense of gratitude to have had this opportunity.

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**Small achievements:
Abatan creates floor mats**

I wanted to share a small update on the activity done with the Abatan farmers. In my last newsletter, I had shared my doubts as to whether such workshops do actually have an impact on the participants. I am happy to be able to say that a month after the activity, Cendang contacted me to tell me that they are making mats using recycled materials and that she was given two samples as tokens for the skills we taught them. I rejoiced to this news: the little successes do make the difference in the world of international cooperation.



The meaning of this word is linked to the act of rummaging through a pile of clothes. This is the way most people here buy what they wear. The reasons are many. Partly, it is the cheap price of the goods, but also their quality: even if pre-used, such clothes are imported and therefore are often better than the new ones "made in China" which you can find in the little local stores. For us foreigners, the wag-wag allows us to find items that are closer to our taste but also to the sizes that fit us. As far as I am concerned, it is also an ethical choice against consumerism. Even in Europe I was always trying to buy second-hand.

When being present matters

One of the most important lessons learned during this first year was understanding the importance of being present. People here do not care what you do during an activity or how you fill your time during working hours. Being present, is already work. Despite having begun to understand this concept, I realised that I will never fully adapt to it. For me, it is unthinkable to spend endless hours to just be present. I however also understood that to be able to survive here and bring changes, I have first to demonstrate my willingness to participate to the proposed activities, even when I do not have a defined role. With time, I also understood that the biggest steps made with my colleagues in terms of my collaboration, were made exactly during these occasions where, in fact, I was not doing "anything".

On such opportunities, I also noticed how networking can be done. Here, there aren't occasions organised specifically with the aim of making connections with stakeholders. Therefore, it is necessary to be able to take advantage of events where you really thought you were not going to do anything at all. This happened for example during the Tongtongan, a meeting organised for all leaders active in the various parishes of the vicariate. Despite not having a precise role during this event, I ended up finding out about the project Angelicum, of which I will talk more in detail later on. Moreover, almost by chance, Mona and I ended up creating a pop-up charity shop to raise funds for the vicariate's activities.

Often, it also happens to me that whilst I am following my colleagues on field trips, the local communities thank me for my contribution. When, perplexed, I answer "not a problem, but I really did not do anything", the answer I obtain is always on the lines of "you came all the way here to be with us, that isn't nothing".

Living here, I therefore had to change my mind. If people can appreciate just the fact of being amongst them, then being here has some value even when I have the impression that I am doing nothing.

Looking for funds: wag-wag and banana loaves

In Ilocano, second-hand shops are called wag-wagan (shops that sell wag wag).



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Going back to my story, it was during the Tongtongan that Mona and I realised that it was possible to raise funds using clothes that were not being used by anyone. Some time ago, a donation in form of used clothes was made for the victims of a typhoon. Unfortunately, such help turned out to be of little use, as the roads to those places were completely blocked. The vicariate had to sell the best clothes to be able to send a monetary donation, but the rest of the goods had been left in boxes forgotten by everyone, until the Tongtongan this year. Some of our colleagues thought that they could try to sell some of these items.



Mona and I, with Sr. Corie and Sr. Jenni, in our improvised wag-wagan.

Life stories: beware of the typhoon

Whilst I write, I am locked in my house, as typhoon Rosita is angrily hitting Northern Luzon. Nothing compared to her brother Ompong, which attacked us in September. It had been my first super-typhoon (synonym of hurricane). It is those 8 hours that I want to tell you about. I will retell them as I remember them, with the feelings I felt during those moments. Looking back, that climatic phenomenon is not so scary anymore, and my words might seem a little exaggerated. But in those moments, I really did feel that way.

We had been waiting for the typhoon, so it wasn't an unexpected noise that woke me up, it was in fact the dreaded Ompong which was knocking at my walls with its fierce wind and strong rains. The metal roof was bending, causing alarming noises which I could not confirm due to the darkness. The blackout was spread all over Bontoc. Scared and wide awake, I noticed the phone blinking with a huge alarm sign: ATTENTION, the typhoon has come, and is hitting you now. Then the confusion. They said it would arrive at 2pm. Why did it hit 12 hours ahead? And now? The plan to transfer to Mona's house is out of the window (no pun intended). Crap. I am stuck in a wooden house, placed on a hill. The house has suffered from subsidence, and you know it happened during a past typhoon. Double crap. What to do? I am sleeping in the attic, just under the roof. Bad idea. Let's transfer to the lower floor. Crap again. No light. The blackout... My goodness, I can hear the metal roof moving. And I cannot see anything. I try to shine my torch light towards the night. The rain is going sideways. I can SEE the wind. A hungry force that keeps hitting the house again and again. The water starts to seep through the windows. What to do?

I need the toilet. How do I get there? The room that leads to it is semi-open. The noises coming from there are also scary. I am very scared. But I need the loo. Armed with head torch and umbrella, I venture out. I am half wet when I come back in. The wind is strong and the rain is coming through the window into the bathroom.



Our colleagues during their traditional dance. The theme was unity amongst the two provinces of Mountain and Ifugao.

As Mona and I didn't have a precise role, we decided to get involved. Being foreign, we immediately attracted visitors to our little store. Thus, we started to chat to our customers and give advice. It didn't take long until the rumour that we were good sales people spread. Here normally shop owners welcome you (or I should perhaps say "do not welcome you") sitting on a chair, looking bored and unwilling to answer any questions. Our friendly ways surprised our clients who happily spread the word. For once, we were able to use our influence for something useful.

Seen the success with the wag-wag, we realised that the parishioners are very fond of purchasing items that help their Church. We therefore decided to bake sugar-free banana bread, inasmuch as we had received a huge donation of the fruit during the Tongtongan. Even on this occasion, we did really well. We set up our table

outside the Church one day after mass, and within 15 minutes we had sold almost all the 100 pieces we had baked!

The bishop was proud of our successes.

Panagakabsat

Every year during the month of September, a gathering of the three vicariates that make up the Montañosa region is organised in Baguio. It is an event with friendly competitions, where it is possible to win a nice sum for the

I don't want to be alone. I should have gone to Mona's the day before. But how could I know? It was all calm then. I am exhausted and I try to sleep again. But how can I sleep? I don't want to be caught unawares. What if a tree falls on the house whilst I sleep? I do eventually drop off. But only for ten minutes. How long is this night? I want the day to come, so I can SEE. I text everyone I can think of. Internet is obviously down, so forget about contacting the family. Plus, I don't want them to panic. Crap, crap, crap. They said the typhoon will last 24 hours. 24 hours of this hell? Please no! I drop off again... I wake up, it has only been half an hour. But in the end, it's 6am. Why is it still so dark outside? Well, there is hell going on outside, of course it is not a bright morning. I keep looking outside hoping that there will be an opening. A time long enough to head out and go to Mona's. Forget it. The trees are BENDING. If I went out, I would get blown away. A tree or a branch would certainly fall on my head... Staying in the house is safer. I try to make a video but I press the wrong button. Stupid me! When it's light enough, I can see the river. Completely brown, it's growing. Water level rising. Fast. I feel for the Samoki people who will be affected by that. I am curled up in a ball, tensed as hell. When is this going to end??

10am. The wind has lessened. Some people pass by my house. They are locals. They must know that it's ok to head out. My bag is ready. I run out and reach Mona's house. Her house is also flooded. Possibly worse than mine... What the hell. But now I am not alone anymore. I start to relax a little. At about 5pm we have confirmation that the typhoon has really moved on and is not coming back. I feel bad for the next victims. But now we are safe. Sigh of relief.

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vicariate activities. Panagakabsat means “brotherhood” and it is a festive way to gather all vicariates within the Cordillera region, which once upon a time were all part of one unique vicariate, then called Montañosa. During these three days, the three groups compete at basketball, the Philippines favourite sport, volleyball, ping-pong, darts and table games such as chess. The culmination of the entire event is a themed traditional dance. This year, the theme was unity. For many years, the vicariate of Bontoc-Lagawe (Bon-Lag) has been gaining the golden prize, so the competition against us was fierce. Despite the efforts from Baguio and Tabuk, Bon-Lag won first place, with the prize of PHP 45000 (about GBP 670), which here represents a nice sum. Mona and I (with the help of Laura, Comundo co-worker in Tabuk) had a lot of fun as we finally managed to party in European style; with a couple of beers and disco music on the last night. This way, without even noticing it, we became the highlight of the night. The day after, most people had a video of our dances on their phone. Even to date, when I travel to the different parishes for our activities, some priests comment “you do like dancing then...”.

Lamut makes candles out of recycled wax

One of the biggest achievements of this period has been a creative workshop aimed at revive left-over candle wax, which normally gets piled up in the sacristy of the different parishes. Already months ago, my colleague Santos had shown an interest in offering this workshop. However, not being used to practical activities, he had misjudged the amount of time that it would require, so despite having promised the youth that they would be making candles, he had to disappoint them due to the lack of time. The priest invited us to come back as soon as possible. After two months, we were finally able to talk about waste management, our duty (also spiritual) to respect the nature that surrounds us and to think of ways how to raise funds for future youth activities, all by also reusing available resources.

We had only invited the youth to this event, but to our surprise, a couple of ladies who were interested took part. At the end of the day, the participants were happy about their creations and my colleagues were satisfied. And myself, I tried to do my part in the most participative way, and to show a methodology that can encourage young people to think with their heads, and not always be spoon-fed the answer. I am not sure whether they really did notice this intention of mine, as feedback here is very hard to get. Culturally, to make a critique, even if constructive, is not easy. In small steps, I hope that by giving simple examples, also my colleagues might get convinced that using more participative methods might get better results.

The priest then invited us to go back to offer the activity in one of the nearby villages. For them, it is not easy to reach the centre of Lamut, due to the transportation costs. We will therefore be going there by the end of the month, and with the help of three participants to the first sessions, we will redo the workshop. We are hoping thus to make this activity more sustainable and to encourage the local youth to share the skills learned.

A look into the future

Due to the fact that at the moment we don't have a Comundo representative here in the Philippines (a Country Program Manager), it has been hard to plan for next year. With a lot of

In search of Christmas

A few months ago, whilst you were enjoying the heat of Summer, I ended up in Sinto, about one and a half hours away from Bontoc. It is on the way to Baguio, and since we were travelling with father Andrew, we were able to stop for a coffee in a café he liked. With great surprise, Mona and I realised that there, the temperature is a lot lower. Such phenomenon is not hard to explain; it is simply due to the higher altitude. A little girl was even wearing a woollen hat! Upon entering this coffee shop, a favourite of our companion, we felt a great nostalgia for Christmas. There was a fire place, and inside you could imagine being in a mountain hut.

We very much enjoyed both the coffee and the chocolate muffins we ordered. Once we got back in the car, we put on our Christmas playlist at full blast! We decided that we will have to go back there this December, so that I will feel a little more at home. Because Christmas in the heat, really isn't the same



With Mona and father Andrew in Sinto

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patience and open-mindedness, I have been able to outline some areas where I could be able to help meaningfully.

The Catholic Church is organised at national level, and so is the Youth Ministry, the area where I collaborate. 2019 will be the Year of the Youth and for this reason, the Youth Ministry at national level has sent information about the themes that are most dear to today's youth.

There, I was pleased to see that finally topics that are aimed at social issues have started to be brought up. This is what I had expected from the start, but it had not been the case up to now. Amongst the reported concerns, there were ecological issues, health (with a particular note to HIV, depression and suicide), education (which is not granted to everyone), the economic challenge of not being guaranteed a job and the chance to live in dignity, politics (specifying that young people want to have positive leaders), the dialogue with other cultures and attitudes in terms of ethnicity, belief and ideology (amongst which they mention same-sex attraction) and social relationships, where the movement towards digitalised communities is highlighted.

Thanks to this document, I was able to talk openly to my colleagues, whom having had the "confirmation" that these issues now have to be tackled, they proposed to start with two topics. We had to choose the least "liberal", as the Philippines' Cordillera is really conservative. Starting to talk about sexuality and HIV is not yet thinkable. Already twice I happened to hear that "we don't have HIV here in the mountains, it's only in the cities". And yet, when asked whether they know how the virus is contracted, many are unsure.

I have however had to accept that there is a time for everything and therefore I need to take one step at a time. My colleagues were interested to continue with the work we already started on awareness about ecological issues (waste



The product is almost finished: candles made with recycled wax. The moulds, also made with reused materials, will only be removed after the curing period.

management, eco farming, etc....). They are also willing to try to incorporate more practical activities with the use of creativity, as we observed the desire that this youth has to become protagonist, and not only a passive audience. Their liveliness is heart-warming and needs to be encouraged.

We have also established that we will start to offer workshops to help the youth understand the social media phenomenon, so that they can protect themselves from it. This new openness towards social concerns is also due to the words of Pope Francis whom, according to this letter, wants to encourage the youth to open up towards a "culture of encounter; the encounter between people with different dispositions and beliefs. I am happy because now at least I have a document that will help open some doors that up to now were not only double-locked but also chained up.

Another opportunity I have seen materialised, is what I mentioned earlier, the home-study programme offered by the Angelicum college. This was introduced in Bontoc several years ago and aims to help those youth whose financial means do not allow them to attend school full-time. For the time-being, I am still just monitoring this possibility and it is still unsure whether a collaboration will be possible. Just like for everything else, I will need to be patient.

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