

Christmas Greetings from the Philippines



Rhett de Jesus, a friend of Cathy, drew this image of overseas Filipino workers and parols.

Dear friends and family,

Christmas Greetings from the Philippines!

Now that the strictest quarantine measures are behind us, many public places are open with Christmas music. Although the Philippines boasts the longest Christmas season, this year, it was still slow to start. September and October were quiet, with people waiting for health protocols to loosen. Finally, it happened! We are still praying that covid cases will stay low, with more people to receive vaccines and boosters, and that we could return to in-person school and work at the office.

From January to June, our lives were one long wait for more re-openings. We worked from home, continuing our work with the United Church of Christ in the Philippines, and more partners in the region through online webinars, seminars, and meetings. It was complicated for everyone. There were hybrid meetings, followed by some positive covid cases. It was disheartening but thankfully everyone has recovered. Even our local church where our family worships, hosted one in-person worship in July, but that was all.

Our colleagues worked harder to keep the people awake and aware of what was happening with the challenges to the human rights of everyday Filipinos. It is the beginning of the election season. The national elections for president, vice president, with senators and congressional representatives, are next May, and people are getting excited, anxious, and feisty. Sara Duterte, daughter of the current president is under pressure to run. Bongbong Marcos, son of the former President Marcos is running for a second time. They recently announced their candidacy with Marcos for president and Duterte for vice president. The current VP Leni Robredo also announced her presidency. Each day there is news about the candidates and the candidacy process.

In early October, Maria Ressa the journalist received the Nobel Peace prize with Dmitry Muratov. She is the first Filipino to receive this distinction. Many colleagues received this announcement because of how it offered hope and light to them who fight so hard to keep the truth alive. Especially now but before this election season, several colleagues are discouraged from participating in the political discussions. Arrests, intimidation, and disinformation campaigns often target more journalists, lawyers, and advocates for the Filipino people.



With the many challenges before and especially during the pandemic, we have continued to enjoy worship and enjoy children's Sunday School. Thankfully, we also enjoy friends through a small group where we are reading Mark Scandrette's "Practicing the Way of Jesus" slowly and sharing life together. From this group, one friend helped to launch short-term webinar series about electoral education. Topics have ranged from whether the church should be involved in social issues, fake news and how to spot it, political dynasties, and corruption. Thankfully, this small group and local church are one constant source of life and light.

Between the relaxed, strict, and relaxed again, quarantine measures related to the delta variant in the Philippines and United States, our family regained some strength and rest during a brief but relaxing vacation in northern California. That rest was most welcome before the new school year not only for Aurelie, who is in fourth grade now, and Cathy, who added to her already packed work schedule, a doctoral program. Juan is holding down the fort and keeping the house livable while supporting colleagues that support the human rights of children.

After all the extra waiting, wondering, and wandering which feels like an extended Advent, we are now ready to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Many Filipino neighbors already decorated their homes. As for our family, we will decorate during the twelve days before December 25, with our plastic Christmas tree. We will dust off our parol (Christmas Filipino lantern) and place it on our garage. Together with Filipino neighbors and friends, we will reflect, meditate, sing, pray and rest for this year that is ending and for the one to come. Many of you will do the same with your families and friends, your churches and faith communities. God bless you all.

Your friends in Christ, Juan, Cathy and Aurelie