

## Letter from the Philippines - 9/6/05

I've been here for two weeks now. In some ways it feels like much more than that. It seems like months since I slept in my bed at home or ate a meal that did not include rice. On the other hand, the time has flown by because of all the incredible experiences I've been so privileged to have had.

My flight arrived in the city of Cebu in the south of the Philippines after a long flight via Doha and Singapore, and I was met at the airport by Peter, the volunteer coordinator. From the plane I'd looked down upon beautiful islands with sandy beaches, blue waters and gently bobbing fishing boats and couldn't wait to leave the air-conditioning behind me. As soon as we left the airport I realized my mistake. 32 degrees! Hot hot hot. To help the process of acclimatization, volunteers are not taken directly to the project in which they'll be working. Instead they spend a week living at the Salesian Provincial house, where I learned to love the funny smell and constant whirring of the air-con in my room.

The drive to the house was a good introduction to the Filipino road system. Taxis, cycle-rickshaws known as sidecars, small horse drawn carriages called tartanillas, motorbike-tricycles and private cars do battle to edge forward through the traffic, but the undisputed kings of the road are the brightly coloured jeepneys. These converted US army jeeps are the main form of public transport and seem to exist beyond any highway code, stopping whenever someone wants to get on or off. There are few official jeepney stops - and nobody seems too surprised when one just slams on its brakes in the middle of the road. Often they have girls' names or religious phrases on the front. I suppose it is some comfort to see that the jeepney which runs you down has 'Jesus saves' painted above the windscreen. Filipino drivers, including J.R. who drove us back from the airport, make good use of their vehicles' horns. A single 'beep' can mean anything - a greeting, a signal of anger or frustration, a sign of 'respect' to a beautiful girl or, most commonly, 'I am here' given when overtaking - most jeepney drivers don't appear to see much point in wing-mirrors.

My time at the Provincial house was filled by Peter and Fr Julius introducing me to the Salesian projects in and around Cebu and giving me a crash course in all things Filipino. Although I'm sure we only scratched the surface, it was a fascinating time. I was taken to Ayala Mall, a huge shopping complex that would not look out of place in the UK, frequented here mainly by the rich. In stark contrast was our visit to a fragile-looking roadside shack to buy some lechon (an extremely popular local dish, fatty roast pork with added spices). To my amazement there was an armed policeman singing videoke (video karaoke) love songs. He dedicated a ballad to me - one man, fighting against crimes to music! Videoke and karaoke seem to be something of a national craze. On the street there are small stalls at which people can sing or listen to musicians of varying quality. From my office, where I am writing this report, I can sometimes hear the locals performing - which is usually very enjoyable.

After a week I was taken to visit Pasil, the community in which I will be working. It is a relatively small slum area with a huge population and high unemployment rates. The streets are narrow, with stalls, children and basketball games making them very difficult to negotiate in a car. The most common vehicles here are the sidecars, pedal-powered by men and boys who weave skilfully around cats, dogs, bikes, pigs, hens, cockerels (for cock fighting), loose basketballs and innumerable children. The powerful smell of fish and pollution and the constant drone of a power-station are impossible to miss. In the middle of the chaos are the gates of Don Bosco-Pasil. By day it is an oasis of calm as a vocational training centre for local out-of-school youth. At 6pm each day it becomes a busy youth centre at which 100s of young people play basketball.

All my years of obsessively playing basketball and following the American NBA have certainly paid off. There are courts everywhere. In Pasil they range from a large, professional looking gym to homemade contraptions hanging over the road. One of the highlights of my time here so far was playing a game of 2 on 2 in the road with 3 young people. Around 100 people gathered to watch, including one man who shouted "time out" or "commercial break" each we had to hold the ball while a sidecar passed by. Just for the record my team won.

For the first couple of days I commuted to Pasil from the Provincial House, along with Bernhard, a German volunteer who will also be staying here. Each day we seemed to find a slightly different way to get lost, but there was always a friendly Filipino around to help us on our way! The journey required taking two jeepneys

and enabled us to see them as public transport, not just interesting novelties. It also gave us access to parts of the Philippines that an average tourist may not see, such as the city waking up, markets and people in Pasil washing in the street.

On our third day in Pasil we were invited to join a group of staff on a day trip to a beach. What a day! The people were so friendly and welcoming, the water was warm and the food was never-ending. As well as managing to get a very burnt back I conquered some of my dislike of sea food, tasting eel and some tiny (baby?) fish that looked like grains of rice with eyes, eaten raw. I am eating very well here; lots of rice, pansit noodles, fish, meat and an incredible variety of fruits. For some reason my fingernails are growing much faster than at home - perhaps the result of rice three times a day?

I finally moved to Pasil two days ago, into a room with views of the sea and the rooftops of the slum. I'm missing the air-con but gradually getting used to the smell and the noise. The trainees are on vacation, leaving me with time during the day so I have been visiting a local orphanage run by the Missionaries of Charity to play with the children and hopefully pick up some of the local dialect. In the evening I play basketball and music at the youth centre.

At the moment I have a sneaking suspicion that I smell of fish. My shower doesn't work so I have bucket-baths. My bucket had a hole in it so I asked the cook for another one. I think its last use may have been holding fish. In fact a mouse just ran into my office, wrinkled its nose at me and ran out again.

All the best

James

### **Letter from the Philippines - 11/7/05**

I've been here a little over a month now and things are getting much busier. The Training Centre has had its first week of term and lessons are underway. The Youth Centre is busy every night and 2 or 3 times a day at the weekend. The Clinic and Pharmacy open 5 half days per week offering free consultations with visiting doctors and dentists as well as cheap medicines. Dahlia, known around Pasil as 'Ate' Dahlia (big sister), the project's social worker, has interviewed and arranged the scholars' sponsorship program. So much going on!

I'm teaching basic mathematics to the junior trainees. I have 7 classes from all departments. They spend 70% of their time here learning practical skills in the various workshops (Automotive, Machine, Woodwork and Garment Technology) and the rest in the classrooms, for Maths, English, Christian Ethics and Job Motivation training. Time is also allocated for assemblies, Mass, music and sport.

My teaching seems to be going well up to this point, but there's such a range of ages and abilities that it's hard to tell. In my classes the youngest is 16 and the oldest is 28. For some the mathematics appears to be almost completely new, while others have completed High School, which seems to be roughly equivalent to the English Secondary School, and so have seen it all before. Learning maths in English is definitely a challenge for the majority. To make it even more difficult, Filipino English is very different - for example the 'r' in Mark is emphasized to give 'Mar-rark' - and nobody can hear the difference between my 13 and 30, 14 and 40 etc - it sometimes makes things very confusing.

The youth centre is always fun. As well as all the basketball there's also a games room with table tennis, pool, videoke (I've never heard so many love songs) and table football. The little ones also play a variety of games, including games with flip flops and bottle tops, and the current favourite - cling to the volunteer as he attempts to juggle playing basketball and protecting them from getting flattened.

At present the youth centre appears to be made up of huge toads, numerous cockroaches, massive rats and tiny lizards on top of the usual 100-plus young people. The toads get everywhere. Last night I found a bunch of giggly girls trying to sneak past one on the stairs to the top floor. Somehow this toad had climbed 2 and a half flights of stairs!

I've had a couple of opportunities to walk around the slum with Dahlia. What a privilege to be shown around by a Filipino social worker who has worked here for 10 years. Everywhere we go we're greeted by smiles, as well as by cries of "Hey Joe!". All whites are known as "Joe", apparently because the US Marines, or GI Joes, were placed here during World War II. With Dahlia I was able to see things that would not normally be seen by a tourist. In the Philippines there is such a massive contrast between the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. The huge air-conditioned malls feel a million miles away from the tiny, fragile buildings squashed onto and over narrow alleyways. The corrugated iron roofs make the houses unbearably hot so many people, including the sick, lie on benches, tables or hand carts outside. There is little or no privacy in Pasil - people even wash themselves on the street.

Children seem to be everywhere. Families are large, with 7 or 8 children not being unusual. One of the Salesian Priests told me that there are between 15 and 20 baptisms per week in this small parish alone. On one of our walks we came to the edge of the slum, a corner where a river meets the sea. There's rubbish everywhere, swept in by the tide or dumped by the locals, making a thick carpet of plastic, card, glass, metal and rotting food. Unbelievably there were about 30 children playing here, searching through the rubbish for treasures and doing acrobatics using the softer trash as a crash mat. They also swim in the heavily polluted waters and don't seem to understand why I'm not interested.

Many of the men are involved in cock-fighting, but the children have different little warriors. On a walk I came across a group of children gathered around a boy holding a small stick. On the stick were two spiders, each around the size of a 50p piece. Apparently children buy a spider for around 7p and then fight it against a friend's, sometimes betting on the result. They store them in cardboard boxes like matchboxes, segmented to keep the spiders separated. When blown upon the spider seems to freeze allowing the child to shut the box. It all makes conker fights and pokemon seem rather pathetic.

There's so much more to tell you all but I'm getting complaints that I'm not sending the reports, so I'll end this and save the rest for the next.

All the best

James

### **Letter from the Philippines - 26/8/05**

It's just after 6pm and I'm sitting in the office after a long day that featured mass with the trainees (hymns accompanied by an instructor playing keyboard and me on saxophone), 5 hours of teaching, a 'staff Vs trainees' basketball match (we won!), two showers, two rice-based meals and an hour spent calculating grades for reports. Realised my third report is long past due so decided to at least begin it now. Unfortunately the youth centre is in full swing and a number of children have followed me in and want to say hello.

So here we go!

Hello name si jenessa iam 12 yearsold

hiy my name patricia i like singing

myn name jennivvie i like is dance

my name is judy ann im grade 3

Ok - me again. I must point out that I do not teach them. My students are all at least 16 years old. These girls attend the youth centre and 2 of them have their books and uniform for the local elementary school sponsored

through Don Bosco. Those 4 sentences took about 20 minutes and generated so much interest - they don't get to use the computers at school much.

All the above was written two weeks ago. After a fortnight of putting it off it's time for me to continue. It's been a long time since my last report and I'm really struggling to get going on this one. So much has happened. How can I explain even a fraction of what I've experienced?

In the last report I described the waste-dumping area where the children play and said that they couldn't understand why I wouldn't swim with them there. Well, on a particularly hot day I made a spur of the moment decision, emptied my pockets and joined them. I kept my head well above the water, vigorously fought off any dodgy looking waste that floated near me and rushed to shower (bucket bath) afterwards. It was worth it though - the children were so happy.

The Trainees' mid-term exams are starting tomorrow - fractions for my mathematics classes. Unfortunately I was sick yesterday so missed a number of last minute revision lessons. Tonsillitis - no surprise really with the heat, teaching over the drone of the power station and breathing the polluted air. I'm becoming something of a regular at the Don Bosco Clinic.

August the 15th was the feast of the Assumption which meant a day off classes for the trainees (and their instructors!). What a day. We started with a mass on the basketball court with music by the youth 'combo' (who are trying to get gigs in Cebu City with me as promoter and saxophonist). This was followed by a parade through the streets of Pasil, behind a statue on the back of a truck and the loudest drums and bugles I have ever heard. Bernhard, the German volunteer social worker, was upstairs trying to sleep off an illness - no chance with that noise. When we returned to Don Bosco we had 'snacks' before the next part of the program. Snacks are an interesting thing. The average Filipino seems to have 3 main meals plus 2 or 3 large snacks each day. Some of the snacks would make perfectly adequate meals in themselves. Money is very short here and there is no question that many of people live in extreme poverty, but food does not seem to be a problem - it's cheap and plentiful - especially fish, rice and bread rolls with a hint of cake to them.

Anyway, back to the 15th. As well as being the Assumption it was also the grand opening of the Training Centre's intramural sports tournament. The ceremony included trainees running around with flaming torches, the lighting of a petrol-doused large torch, a pledge of good sportsmanship, inspirational songs and a cheer-dance competition featuring an array of colourful pom-poms. I was one of three judges awarding marks for originality, coordination and crowd reaction. Some of the dances were fantastic - so complicated and together.

In the afternoon there were traditional games (many of which looked very similar to our party games) and then an exhibition basketball match - instructors versus trainees. We lost this time, but did so in style. I fouled out, but you'll be pleased to hear that I have managed to forgive the referees for their errors in judgment.

After the Training Centre closed there was a brief respite before the feast continued with the Parish and Youth Centre. Another mass, another procession around the streets. I think my favourite moment was when Mary's outstretched arm got caught in overhead cables, nearly pulling her from the truck. During the procession I carried a boy on my shoulders, from where he snored gently into my ear. One of the Salesians later told me the story of this boy. When he was little he was sold by his mother (for less than 60 pounds), but was dumped back in the slum when the purchaser realised he has a slight disability. By this stage his mother had left and he now stays with another relative.

I heard many more tragic stories like his at a two-day conference I attended with Bernhard and Dahlia (social workers). It included lectures about the juvenile justice system, trafficking of women and children, child abuse and prostitution. It opened my eyes to the sad reality of what goes on here. On a more positive note I met a number of inspirational people who are working for the victims in these situations. Through them I have been able to visit the Pink Centre (a centre which deals with abused children), Balay Isadora (a house for young prostitutes) and made a very short visit to Operation 2nd Chance (a prison for young offenders). I hope to revisit these and spend time at other projects to learn more and make contacts useful for the work here in Pasil.

Ok - this is probably too long already so I'll sign off now. Lots more to say but it'll have to wait.

James

### **Letter from the Philippines - 2/11/05**

Hello everybody

It's now been 2 months since my last report, so I'm a whole month late. Sorry! Unbelievably I've now been here for over 6 months; half my time here is gone already. Once again so much has happened that this can only be a selection of highlights (and I suppose some lowlights too).

Jo came to visit for most of August. It was wonderful to share so many of the things I've experienced with somebody from the UK. She too had to learn to cope with the numerous people, constant noise and excitement of life in Pasil. We took a one-week holiday on a beautiful island to the north of Cebu, staying in a simple bamboo cottage on a beach. I really appreciated being outside Pasil - away from the pollution. The VECO Power Station is only about 100 metres away from Don Bosco and it pumps out horrible smoke all day and all night. Amazingly it makes my desk vibrate slightly and if you hold an umbrella open here it shakes! Over the last 2 months I have been sick numerous times (nothing too serious but all horrible and involving repeated and expensive hospital visits - but thankfully no overnights) and I've promised myself that I must try to slow down a little and spend a couple of nights every month outside of Pasil.

Anyway - back to Jo's visit. We saw cockfighting, which is truly vicious as the men attach blades to the feet of the birds before they fight. We went fishing in the middle of the night on a small fishing boat, marveling at the colourful and unusual catch. My favourite was a long red fish with an extended tube for a nose. We didn't help the fishermen much but I think they enjoyed watching us play with their fish.

The training centre had final exams immediately after Jo left. The majority of my classes did well, while the others had 'remedial' classes with me last week. All those students will be seniors from tomorrow and a new batch of trainees will begin. In the coming semester I will be teaching all the junior classes basic mathematics. I'm also hoping to spend a little time in the woodwork and automotive workshops picking up some new skills. Last semester I was very patiently taught by the dressmaking students and managed to make Jo a dress. I wonder if there's time to build a car before coming home in May?

Most of October has been focused on the Youth Centre's 'Bahandi' Project. To explain what it was all about here is a copy of the rationale I wrote for the sponsors' programs.

What's the first thing that comes to mind when an average Cebuano hears the name 'Pasil'? At best it might be the fish market. Unfortunately it is much more likely to be 'danger', 'poverty', 'overcrowding' or 'drugs'. Some taxi drivers will not even enter its streets.

'Bahandi' is a concert that highlights the more positive aspects of our barangay. Yes, Pasil has difficulties - so let's do something about them. The concert has two aims:

To raise money for the scholarship program at Don Bosco-Pasil, giving the young people access to education to help create a brighter future

To show Cebu a positive side of Pasil - talented and committed young people - treasures by any standard.

Over the last two months a group of over a hundred young people, supported by the Salesians of Don Bosco, have worked in their spare time to prepare all aspects of this show. The youth of Pasil have shone in staging and costume design and production, marketing, choreography, music and numerous other aspects. Their commitment, dedication and hard-work have resulted in 'Bahandi'.

All that hard work paid off last weekend with 2 fantastic concerts, featuring beautiful handmade clothes, stunning choreography, smiling young people and a strange looking white-boy playing saxophone in an ill-fitting traditional costume.

The run up to the show was extremely stressful as we had not managed to sell many tickets. I spent all day one Sunday with a group of young people selling tickets at the Parish dressed in a colourful floral shirt, pyjama style trousers and a huge hat- first mass 5.30am! Along with the dressmaking students I spent many evenings selling tickets door-to-door around Pasil. In the end it was definitely all worth it - the audience was impressed (one rich Filipino gentleman said "The show is so good I don't believe these children are from Pasil") and the youth enjoyed themselves. I really enjoyed getting to know the young people while they were involved in such an intense project.

The last couple of days here have been very interesting. Halloween, All Souls and All Saints are rolled together into one big holiday in which everyone visits their family's dead relatives. This does not mean just popping into the graveyard and placing a flower by the headstone. Instead they visit the cemeteries for hours - it's like a big family outing. They take candles, flowers, food, drink, radios, TVs and playing cards and sit, pray, eat, catch-up with gossip, text their friends and make a day (or night) of it.

Yesterday I was luck enough to visit 3 cemeteries - 1 rich, 1 poor and 1 middle-class (sounds a bit like Goldilocks doesn't it?). The rich one was incredible, like a huge camp out with Pizza Hut, Dunkin' Doughnuts and other fast food stands on hand. The poorer one had soldiers with big guns patrolling, a noticeable number of drunks and a lot of chaos. It was very crowded as people are buried in stacks so families all squashed around their dead. I spent the evening with a family visiting their dead in the middle class cemetery. There were so many candles that it hardly made any difference when the power cut (known as a 'brown out' here). I felt as if Michael Palin might walk around the corner at any minute. What an experience!

That'll do for now. I'll try to send the next one on time.

Love to you all

James

### **Letter from the Philippines - 6/12/05**

Suddenly it's December, Christmas is just around the corner and is certainly making itself felt in my little corner of the Philippines. The karaoke songs that wake me up in the morning now include 'Jingle Bells Rock' and 'The 12 days of Christmas'. There are huge decorations everywhere and 'belens' (life size cribs) on a couple of the street corners. I can't help wondering how much money is being spent. It's a similar story for birthdays, baptisms and feast days - the budget for food, drink and entertainment seems to be high, even though money is certainly not available for other essentials such as health care and education. I suppose those require a larger amount of money over a long period of time, so it is probably unfair to compare them. The people of Pasil certainly make the most of parties though - singing and dancing can go on for hours.

I was reminded of the very real poverty that exists here by the tragic death of a 23-year old young man last week. He was an ex-animator (youth leader) at Don Bosco and played keyboard at the parish church, accompanying the youth choir. He died due to asthma. I don't think anyone in the developed world, or even among more well off Filipinos, would ever die of such a manageable condition. It turns out that he relied on the use of a nebulizer and it was discovered too late that a rat had chewed through the tubing.

His sister is a friend of mine so I attended the wake and funeral, witnessing the shock and despair of the family. For over a week his body was displayed in the small family home so that friends and family could come to pay their respects and keep him company. This involved 10 to 20 people cramming into the room, and more spilling into the street. They played cards, chess and 'Connect 4', ate, drank and said decades of the rosary. There were constantly new people arriving as others left to work or sleep, ensuring that the body was never left alone.

The funeral was beautiful. Don Bosco's youth turned out in force, leading the music and, with family and friends, managing to fill the church. We then all walked in procession to the cemetery. People who passed in jeepneys, cars and tricicads (pedal bike with sidecar) threw coins which were collected by the children and then given to the family towards the cost of the burial.

For me this tragic death showed many aspects of life in Pasil, a slum area: pollution (rats, air pollution - leading to(?) and certainly not helping the medical condition?), lack of access to medical care, religion, community spirit, and the proximity of the extended family. What a contrast to my life in England!

James

### **Letter from the Philippines - 17/1/06**

As promised, here I am again. If this is altogether too much James news in a short period of time I suggest you just ignore it for a while. Undoubtedly my next report will be a long time coming! I always seem to begin by apologising for not sticking to my once-a-month-plan. Oh well.

In the middle of December I went home for 10 days for a hospital check-up and was able to combine this with catching up with Jo, family and friends. It was a lovely time that flew by far too quickly. Perhaps it was a good thing that it wasn't longer as apparently I gained weight very quickly upon leaving behind my rice-dominated diet. I hadn't noticed much change to my appearance but many Filipinos took great pleasure in telling me I was fat when I got back. This seems to be a cultural difference. In England we are often very careful about how we describe people and can be quite offended when people make less than flattering observations about us. Here people will say that someone is fat/thin/handsome/beautiful/ugly without hesitation. Once I came downstairs for the trainees' morning assembly and was told by one that was looking fat and by another that I was spotty. Great!

When I flew back here on the 20th of December I was very happy to be accompanied by my family. My brother stayed for 9 days and my parents for around 3 weeks. It was great to be able to show them many of the things I've told them about.

Had a brain-wave and asked my Mum to write something about her and Dad's experiences here

"We arrived at Cebu airport in the early evening, a day late owing to a delayed arrival at Hong Kong causing us to miss our connection. First impressions were of heat, noise and hundreds of people trying to find taxis in the small area outside the arrivals hall. James had prepared well for our visit to ensure that we experienced as wide a range as possible of Filipino life. Sensibly, he also built in time for us to rest and begin processing in our minds the things that we were experiencing - essential, as this was our first long haul trip.

Our first visit to the Centre in Pasil followed unpacking and lunch. The first part of the journey was in a taxi through the streets which were packed with colourful, noisy jeepneys and brave pedestrians. The taxi stopped at the corner of L. Flores Street as that is as far as most taxis will go (due to the bad reputation and business of the area). As it was our first visit we rode in the trisikads (push bikes with sidecars), but on future visits we walked from the taxi stop to the Centre, constantly being greeted by the adults and children of the local community whose living areas spill out onto the narrow streets. Noise and people were everywhere, songs from Karaoke machines mixing with the sounds of people and children talking, and the warning sounds of trisikad drivers as they negotiated their way, miraculously not hitting anyone.

We received a warm welcome from the priests and brothers at the Centre as soon as we arrived and felt immediately at home. Before long we became aware of the throb of the Veco - the power station which continues day and night, covering everything with a layer of black dust.

We spent the days leading up to Christmas joining in with the celebrations of the students, parents and staff at the centre. We attended a graduation ceremony for the dressmaking students, a Programme of entertainment put on by all the trainees, and the staff Christmas party at which we joined in the games with everyone else when our names were drawn out of the hat.

We joined in the life of the community outside the centre too. James took us for walks around Pasil and introduced us to his friends as we passed. We attended a Dawn Mass at 4-30 on Christmas Eve. This was the last Mass of a novena (9 days of early morning masses). The church was full and a good crowd was gathered outside too - at least 700 people, with a full choir, band and full compliment of Knights of the Altar (altar servers). The congregation was mostly made up of 14-30 year old men and women. Throughout Mass life was as busy as ever outside the Church with cocks crowing, dogs barking, the odd firecracker banging, and birds occasionally swooping down on Father and the congregation.

Before Christmas we took our first trip to the beach with the Dressmaking graduates - 34 in a Jeepney proved to be too much for the tyres, so we arrived just before dark and left shortly afterwards, but we still had time for a meal and a swim and to take lots of photographs, particularly of the cow which emptied the rubbish bin all over the ground!

The priests and brothers gave us a wonderful Christmas, and this was made more memorable by a walk up a mountain in the rain to an overgrown 'theme park' called Discovery Hills. We were surprised to find a model of ET in pride of place.

On Boxing Day we travelled to a beautiful island called Badian Island for 4 days of sheer luxury. Although it was fun and relaxing somehow it felt 'false'; - this was not the Philippines which we had started to know just a little bit about.

We were back in the community to celebrate New Year, and Father Reechee kindly took a small party of us up to the mountain to a viewpoint known as 'Tops' to watch the fireworks in the city at midnight from 'above'. But fireworks had started at 3pm as we knew from jumping away from firecrackers in the streets of Pasil, so by midnight the city had disappeared under a cloud of smoke!

Once New Year was over we were able to get a little more familiar with the area around Pasil and the community living within it. We were invited to a fiesta in honour of Our Lady by one of James' teaching colleagues - she kindly invited us into her home, her neighbour's home and her friend's home and in each place we were welcomed with food and drink. Early one morning the dressmaking graduates took us to the overnight fish market, closely followed by the meat market and the fruit market, returning to our hotel in a pony and trap at 4am.

One of the most touching walks we had was with James' colleague Noemi who took us to her house to meet her family. She is the sister of the boy who died of the asthma attack that James wrote about in his December newsletter. We felt privileged to sit with his mother at the altar set up in his memory, and to share the photograph album kept in his memory.

We went sightseeing in Cebu too - James arranged for two of the youth to take us to the Basilica, Magellan's Cross and the city museum. Here we gained an insight into the history of the great festival which was about to take place - the Sinulog to celebrate the feast of Santo Nino - the holy child Jesus.

Other trips included a day trip to the island of Bohol organised by Brother Carlo where we saw the Chocolate Hills and the tarsiers (world's smallest primates), and the driver of our special bus stopped at the roadside and helped James to have a go at ploughing a rice field, following in the wake of the carabao (water buffalo).

James' colleagues from the centre excelled themselves. We attended a ballroom dancing lesson with Yaya (the cook), visited the houses of some of the members of staff, one of which was on stilts over the sea at the end of a very narrow path without handrails - help for some was needed here! And finally there were the walks through the alleyways with Dahlia, the social worker from the centre. Here we met the families living in indescribable poverty, with their dwellings never seeing the light of day, and with no water or sanitation of any kind within easy reach. These are the families that the centre is helping the most, the aim being to give the young adults an education so that they can help to provide for their parents and siblings.

Now we are home, but we will never forget the very special time that we spent around Pasil and with all the people who live there. Thank you to James and to all for giving us such a wonderful experience. "

Thanks Mum!

That's more than enough for now.

James

### From the Philippines - 13/2/06

James's letter from the Philippines this month was in a different style to the previous ones, below is his commentary on a few photographs depicting recent events.



The back of Don Bosco. The river separates Pasil from the next area, Ermita.



The rubbish dump at the back of Don Bosco. Most mornings I look out over the fence and watch the children playing, doing gymnastics and scavenging for plastic to sell.



The VECO power station - our neighbour and the cause of my almost constant sore throat. It makes everything vibrate and spreads black dust over every surface.



One of the main streets in Pasil. So many people! So much movement! The main streets are nice in comparison to the dark alleyways that lead off them, often with an open sewer in the middle.



Me with four of the youth performing a traditional love song. Not sure if the white guy in ill-fitting costume is truly authentically traditional!



The bahandi (treasures) of Pasil. This picture and the one to the left are from the show the youth put on to raise funds for Don Bosco's scholarship program. I had a horrible time trying to sell tickets, but the show was *amazing!*



Dancing on a boat with a Japanese Salesian Novice. We are in a procession of boats in honour of Señor Santo Niño (the Infant Jesus).



The trainees' morning assembly on the main basketball court. Grey = woodworking, sky blue = automotive, dark blue = machine shop, yellow = dress making.



Automotive trainees in the workshop. As well as their practical work they also study academic subjects, including English, maths (with me) and Christian ethics.



Lechon baboy (roast pork) – an essential part of any fiesta. The training center has recently invested in some pigs, hoping to make a profit for the workers' co-op.



In class with the woodwork trainees. They won the last inter-training center dance competition and were runners-up in the basketball league (to us – the admin team!).



A group of our older youth after a workshop about sexual and physical abuse to women and children – huge problems here in Pasil due to the vast number of people squashed into such a small area.

*James*

### **From the Philippines - 8/3/06**

This is a bonus article from James - an article originally written for a parish newsletter to tell of his time in the Philippines and promote service as a Salesian volunteer

Since May I have lived and worked in Don Bosco Youth and Training Center in Pasil, Cebu City. Pasil is an overpopulated slum area with a very bad reputation. Once the city's dumping area, its population boomed with squatters moving from rural areas to the city. In the 70s there were many drug- and gang- related problems. Today things are peaceful – apart from thousands of children, hens, cockerels (for cock-fighting), pigs, dogs, cats, rats (sometimes bigger than the cats – no exaggeration), cockroaches, loose basketballs, trisikads (bicycles with sidecars attached for paying passengers), videoke stalls (very popular here - apparently many people have been killed in Manila over poor renditions of 'My Way') and the constant drone of the city's main power station – our immediate neighbour. So maybe peaceful isn't the right word!

In the middle of all this chaos are the gates of Don Bosco. By day it is an oasis of calm as a vocational training centre for local out-of-school youth. Trainees spend 70% of their time here learning practical skills in the various workshops (Automotive, Machine Shop, Woodwork and Garment Technology) and the remainder in the classrooms, for maths, English, Christian ethics and job motivation training. Time is also allocated for assemblies, Mass, music and sport.

At 6pm each day Don Bosco becomes a busy youth centre with over 200 young people. As well as basketball there's also a games room with table tennis, pool, videoke and table football. The little ones play a variety of games, including games with flip flops and bottle tops, and the current favourite - cling to the volunteer as he attempts to juggle playing basketball and protecting them from getting flattened.

At the same time as all this fun and games, the scholars study in the library. Although education in the Philippines is theoretically free, it comes with many hidden costs. These include paying for school uniform, textbooks, notebooks and stationary. Through Don Bosco's Scholarship Program around a hundred children from poorer families receive their school supplies free of charge. In return these children are expected to attend one-hour study sessions in DBYC five evenings per week.

Don Bosco also offers a Clinic and Pharmacy which opens 5 half days per week giving free consultations with visiting doctors and dentists as well as cheap medicines.

My work is mainly in the Training Center, where I teach basic mathematics to all the junior trainees. I also teach the scholars 2 evenings each week, assist in the Youth Center and play music at the parish.

As a volunteer I have become well known in the area and so have been able to see things off limits to a tourist. The huge air-conditioned malls of the city feel a million miles away from the tiny, fragile buildings squashed onto and over narrow alleyways in Pasil. During my time here I have been invited to spend a number of nights staying with local families, allowing me to get a taste of the reality of life here. The corrugated iron roofs make the houses unbearably hot, so many people, including the sick, lie on benches, tables or hand carts outside. There is little or no privacy here - people even wash themselves on the street.

Children seem to be everywhere. Families are large, with 7 or 8 children not being unusual. At the back of Don Bosco there is a beach covered in rubbish. It is swept in by the tide or dumped by the locals, making a thick carpet of plastic, card, glass, metal and rotting food. Unbelievably there are usually children playing here, searching through the rubbish for plastic to sell or doing acrobatics using the softer trash as a crash mat. They also swim in the heavily polluted waters. On one particularly hot day I made a spur of the moment decision, emptied my pockets and joined them (which led to many telling-offs from friends, family and Fr Bob, the British Salesian Priest who placed me here). I kept my head well above the water, vigorously fought off any dodgy looking waste that floated near me and rushed to shower (bucket bath) afterwards. It was worth it though - the children were so happy.

Many of the men spend their free-time watching and betting on cock-fighting, but the children have different little warriors. On a walk I came across a group of children gathered around a boy holding a small stick. On the stick were two spiders, each about the size of a 50p piece. Apparently children buy a spider for around 7p and then fight it against a friend's, betting on the result. They store them in cardboard boxes like matchboxes, segmented to keep the spiders separated. When blown upon the spider seems to freeze allowing the child to shut the box. It all makes our conker fights and pokemon seem rather pathetic.

On feast days we have huge processions around the slum, following a car which carries an appropriate statue. On the feast of the Assumption I think my favourite moment was when Mary's outstretched arm got caught in overhead cables, nearly pulling her from the truck. During that procession I carried a boy on my shoulders, from where he snored gently into my ear. One of the Salesians later told me the story of this boy. When he was little he was sold by his mother (for less than 60 pounds), but was dumped back in the slum when the purchaser realised he has a slight disability. By this stage his mother had left and he now stays with another relative.

I heard many more tragic stories like his at a two-day conference I attended with Don Bosco's social workers, Bernhard and Dahlia. This included lectures about the juvenile justice system, trafficking of women and children, child abuse and prostitution. It opened my eyes to the sad reality of what goes on here. On a more positive note I met a number of inspirational people who are working for the victims of these situations. Through them I have been able to visit the Pink Centre (a centre which deals with abused children), Balay Isadora (a house for young ex-prostitutes) and Operation 2nd Chance (a prison for young offenders). Thanks to contacts we made at this conference we were able to put on seminars dealing with abuse and children's rights for the youth of Don Bosco. Physical and sexual abuse of women and children are serious problems here due to the vast numbers of people living in such close proximity.

Most of October was focused on the Youth Center's 'Bahandi' Project. To explain what it was all about here is a copy of the rationale I wrote for the sponsors' programs.

What's the first thing that comes to mind when an average Cebuano hears the name 'Pasil'? At best it might be the fish market. Unfortunately it is much more likely to be 'danger', 'poverty', 'overcrowding' or 'drugs'. Some taxi drivers will not even enter its streets.

'Bahandi' is a concert that highlights the more positive aspects of our barangay. Yes, Pasil has difficulties - so let's do something about them. The concert has two aims:

To raise money for the scholarship program at Don Bosco-Pasil, giving the young people access to education to help create a brighter future

To show Cebu a positive side of Pasil – talented and committed young people – treasures by any standard. Over the last two months a group of over a hundred young people, supported by the Salesians of Don Bosco, have worked in their spare time to prepare all aspects of this show. The youth of Pasil have shone in staging and costume design and production, marketing, choreography, music and numerous other aspects. Their commitment, dedication and hard-work have resulted in ‘Bahandi’.

All that hard work paid off with 2 fantastic concerts, featuring beautiful handmade clothes, stunning choreography, smiling young people and a strange looking white-boy (me) playing saxophone in an ill-fitting traditional costume.

The run up to the show was extremely stressful as we had not managed to sell many tickets. I spent all day one Sunday with a group of young people selling tickets at the Parish dressed in a colourful floral shirt, pyjama style trousers and a huge hat. In the end it was definitely worth it – the audience was impressed (one rich Filipino gentleman said “The show is so good I don’t believe these children are from Pasil”) and the youth were amazed by what they had achieved. I really enjoyed getting to know the young people while they were involved in such an intense project.

The first couple of days of November were very interesting. Halloween, All Souls and All Saints rolled together into one big holiday in which everyone visits their family’s dead relatives. This didn’t mean just popping into the graveyard and placing a flower by the headstone. Instead they visited the cemeteries for hours – like a big family outing. They took candles, flowers, food, drink, radios, TVs and playing cards and sit, pray, eat, catch-up with gossip, text their friends and make a day (or night) of it.

I was lucky enough to visit 3 cemeteries – 1 rich, 1 poor and 1 middle-class (sounds a bit like Goldilocks doesn’t it?). The rich one was incredible, like a huge camp out with Pizza Hut, Dunkin’ Doughnuts and other fast food stands on hand. The poorer one had soldiers with big guns patrolling, a noticeable number of drunks and a lot of chaos. It was very crowded as people are buried in stacks so families all squashed around their dead. I spent the evening with a family visiting their dead in the middle class cemetery. There were so many candles that it hardly made any difference when the power cut (known as a ‘brown out’ here). I felt as if Michael Palin might walk around the corner at any minute. What an experience!

I was reminded of the very real poverty that exists here by the tragic death of a 23-year old young man before Christmas. He was an ex-animator (youth leader) at Don Bosco and played keyboard at the parish church, accompanying the youth choir. He died due to asthma. I don’t think anyone in the developed world, or even among more well off Filipinos, would ever die of such a manageable condition. It turns out that he relied on the use of a nebulizer and it was discovered too late that a rat had chewed through the tubing.

His sister is a friend of mine so I attended the wake and funeral, witnessing the shock and despair of the family. For over a week his body was displayed in the small family home so that friends and family could come to pay their respects and keep him company. This involved 10 to 20 people cramming into the room, and more spilling into the street. They played cards, chess and ‘Connect 4’, ate, drank and said decades of the rosary. There were constantly new people arriving as others left to work or sleep, ensuring that the body was never left alone.

So, with just under two months to go, what can I say about my time here? First the obvious but true cliché – I have certainly taken much more than I have given. I feel so privileged to have experienced something of life here. According to the UN about a third of the world’s total urban population now live in slums worldwide – how important it is that we in the (rich) UK understand what this means.

Every time I’ve been in the developing world I’ve been astounded by hospitality. This is taken to extremes in the Philippines – the invitation “Let’s eat!” could be the national motto. I am so grateful to all those who have shared a part of their lives with me.

I have also learned something about the importance of presence. Pasil has been lifted over the years by the continued presence of two religious orders – the Salesians and the Missionaries of Charity (Mother Theresa

Sisters). NGOs have come and gone, but these two have continued to live with and for the people. At a much simpler level I believe that my time here has been meaningful for Don Bosco and the people it serves – in what I have done but also in my presence. People are so pleased that I have been willing to learn about how they live and give them my time.

Interested in volunteering with the Salesians?  
Or email Bob [bobbybosco21@hotmail.com](mailto:bobbybosco21@hotmail.com)

James

From the Philippines - 17/4/06  
Hello everybody. Happy Easter.

I have put off writing this final report for so long, but today I've just decided to sit down and get it done. About time too – I have only 2 more weeks here. I'll be flying home on Monday 1st of May. Time is racing by as I'm preparing my classes for the final exams they'll take on the Friday before I leave. While I'm looking forward to being home I wish there were more lessons between then and now!

My last report was 2 months ago and so much has happened since then. Here are some bits and pieces....

Easter was an incredible experience. When I was tired it felt like hundreds of long Stations of the Cross, extremely long Masses and never-ending processions. When I felt more energetic I enjoyed it immensely. Throughout Lent we had Stations of the Cross instead of the rosary on Friday afternoons with the trainees and Friday evenings with the youth. They were always well attended and peaceful, contrasting with the noise in the slum beyond the walls of Don Bosco. On the last Wednesday before Easter the staff and trainees piled into assorted vehicles and headed for the mountains to pray the Stations with life size statues...or at least that was the theory. In practice they prayed while I sweated and searched for shelter from the sun. The weather has certainly heated up recently. I had proudly thought I'd adjusted to the heat since my arrival. It turns out that it was just not as hot – April/May is summer here. Nasty sweaty nights!

The Easter services themselves were similar to their English equivalents, but the processions were completely new to me. On Good Friday I joined thousands of people taking part in a "Visita Iglesia". We walked in candlelit procession around the city visiting the Basilica, Cathedral and a number of churches to pray. The Easter Vigil mass was followed by another procession in which the males followed a statue of Jesus while the females followed a statue of Mary, before fireworks and celebrations when they met outside the church. Things were delayed by the problem of Jesus' raised hand getting caught in the tangle of overhead cables. This has happened at almost every procession I've been to here (and there have been many) – apparently the cables are mostly illegal tappings, hence the mess. On the feast of Don Bosco the statue was decorated with helium balloons, but we only managed to get about 5 metres from the gate before they had to be released due to snagging. Saturday's procession was followed by the Youth Centre "Praise Jam" – a big concert of music (I played sax) and dance outside the church.

Last month I spent 4 days in Manila, visiting the Salesian projects and some of the sights there. I visited an inspirational home for street boys where everything is sponsored by major companies such as McDonalds and Caltex. At the Provincial House (Salesian's head office) there is a Don Bosco Pizza restaurant where an Italian missionary teaches pasta and pizza making to out-of-school youth – and it's delicious! We were looked after by Fr Mario, a Salesian priest, who also took us to his sister's ranch for a night. They breed horses for racing and are clearly very rich; 1 horse had air-conditioning and we drove around the ranch on a golf cart! The next morning was a huge contrast as we visited the Salesian and Missionaries of Charity houses in Tondo, a large slum described to me as a bigger version of Pasil. I was also able to see the remains of Smokey Mountain and the new site where people live scavenging of the rubbish dumps.

The majority of the graduates from the Training Centre go on to work at MEPZA, a large industrial area where many international companies have factories. I went there for a day with some students to see the situation.

Finding jobs is certainly not easy. In theory you can apply by email and over a couple of days, but in practice there are so many young people desperate for jobs waiting around the factories that jobs are filled almost immediately. The young people from Pasil are at a disadvantage as they often struggle to afford the fare and the costs of applying (birth certificates, barangay clearances and certificates of “good moral character” are all required). Many jobs are advertised as “Experience needed”. This shows the importance of the OJT (on-job-training) section of the course offered by our Training Centre. However, even if a graduate finds work his/her worries are far from over. To attract foreign businesses, various labour laws have been relaxed in MEPZA. Most workers receive only a 6-month contract, after which they are automatically fired and have to begin the application process again. This frees the company from any legal responsibility for pensions or medical support. Many companies also enforce an upper age limit of 26 (!) for their work force.

I have been happy to help some graduates and youth find guaranteed employment weaving furniture at another Don Bosco project in the city, thanks to a friend who works there. So many opportunities seem to depend on contacts here. According to one factory security guard I spoke to, some companies even have “secret hirings”!

On a more positive note I have finally made some visits that I’d been intending to make since I arrived. I spent a weekend at Don Bosco Boys’ Home (a large residential centre for over a hundred street boys) where 2 other British volunteers are based. It was busy but enjoyable – playing basketball, teaching and joining with the music and preparing some high school boys for a trigonometry exam. I also spent a day at SOS Children’s village, a large orphanage based on a different model to Boys’ Home, that of small “family” units.

So, with two weeks to go, what can I say about my time here? First the obvious but true cliché – I have certainly taken much more than I have given. I feel so privileged to have experienced something of life here. According to the UN about a third of the world’s total urban population now live in slums worldwide. How important it is that we in the (rich) UK understand what this means.

Every time I’ve been in the developing world I’ve been astounded by hospitality. This is taken to extremes in the Philippines. The invitation “Let’s eat!” could be the national motto. I am so grateful to all those who have shared a part of their lives with me.

I have also learned something about the importance of presence. Pasil has been lifted over the years by the continued presence of two religious orders – the Salesians and the Missionaries of Charity (Mother Theresa Sisters). NGOs have come and gone, but these two have continued to live with and for the people. At a much simpler level I believe that my time here has been meaningful for Don Bosco and the people it serves, in what I have done but also in my presence. People are so pleased that I have been willing to learn about how they live and give them my time.

James