



2 PHILIPPINE STORY

story collected in 2005

I come from the Philippines, from the Southern island of Mindanao. Our area is a Muslim area even though the Muslims are a minority in the Philippines and there are a lot of bombings there. That's why when they asked me to go to Belfast I found it the same as back home although here, the Christians fight other Christians but back home the Muslims fight the Christians.

I belong to a Catholic family which is very religious. I have two brothers and two sisters. Back home it's hard to have a large family. In the Philippines, the main problem is poverty. Around 90% of our country is Christian but the government is corrupt.

After my father died, I had no desire to go abroad since I saw this as a ticket to bring my family to a better place and now I can't. We are not a rich but average family and my

father's motto was always "Contentment starts with a thankful heart." My friends all went abroad to work and I felt lonely at home. Most of them went to England so I applied. When I was told I was going to Belfast, I did not know where that was. But then my friends said, "Do you know about Ireland and the IRA? Are you nuts to go there?" I got afraid and asked my mum if it was OK to go. I began to research about the history of the place and that's the time we began to pray. We knew that if we prayed, God would never bring us to harm and there must be a purpose in this. I wanted to seek his will. My mum asked if I had prayed and I remembered the passage "The Lord will send his angels ahead of you to prepare the way", so I accepted the job. I believe that if you pray, everything will go smoothly and when I applied, everything went through very quickly. We had no problem with the placement fee and there were no queries about my

health even though I was susceptible to pneumonia.

So, I thought that the Lord must be in it. When I arrived here, I found Belfast to be a quiet place. On the first day, there were no bombs and I found the people friendly. Younger kids still stare at us and throw bottles at us but in Dundonald it's not too bad. The elderly and the patients in the hospital are very welcoming here. A priest came to visit us at our house one day and we did not know who he was so we hid because we were scared of opening the door to strangers. But eventually we opened the door to him and he brought us to his service. When I reflect on this, I feel very guilty that we did not let him in!!! So many of my friends had gone to England and then stopped going to church and I always prayed:

"Lord, if I'm going to go to Belfast, I want to be able to go to church." That has not been a problem here.

We have a Bible study for Filipino nurses and their husbands on a Wednesday. It's a mixed group of Protestants and Catholics, which is good. As long as we're Christians and believe in Jesus Christ, that's all that matters.

I go to church here in Ballyhackamore and at the Elim. In terms of what I'm used to back home, church here is different. Back home, it's more lively. Back home, the whole family goes to church, including the little children running up and down the aisles. There are also more guitars back home and the tune we sing to the prayer Our Father is much faster and livelier. The mass here is slower.

I've been here for two years now. I know some people find us being here a problem. I know people say 'They're grabbing our jobs'. However the Royal College of Nurses have done their research and they know that they could not cover the need for nurses here. There is a purpose in why I'm here. There are loads of missionaries back home and now it's also our turn to be a missionary. Doing nursing is a vocation as much as it is a profession. I try to display good character: not to be irritable or grumpy but always to keep on smiling.

People often ask us Filipino nurses, "Why do you keep smiling even when the weather is bad?" We experience poverty but we still smile. I find people here more temperamental. Someone once told me that people here are temperamental like the Irish weather. This was a good clue for me!

Communication is the hardest thing in being a nurse here. So far, patients are very accommodating and people are mostly polite but I find that patients here complain a lot. Maybe that's my purpose in being here. They complain about how many months they have to wait

before they have their operation. I tell them about the health system back home and how you have to pay for everything to do with healthcare. Here, in the wards, you have a television, you have good food, you even have a menu for your food. It's like being in a hotel!! You live like prince and princesses here. I tell them how blessed they are here and how comfortable they are. Back home, if you have work at all, you are thankful and you don't complain. Here you have too many rights to complain.

In order to become a nurse I worked as a voluntary nurse for two years without pay. It's normal for your parents to pay for your entire education to become a nurse. My mum paid for all of this in order to get a qualification. You need to be a voluntary nurse in order to prove your skills. Other people jump the queue because of the political connections that they have. My uncle was the chief of the hospital that I worked in and people thought I would get ahead because of this. But I did not. I did many surgical electives in the smaller islands and I worked as many hours as I could in the week. A forty-hour week is normal but I always tried to do more because I felt sorry for the patients.

Our contract here is for two years and I now have a five-year permit. I do miss home. Back home, every weekend, all of your family meets together. I miss Sunday lunch and especially birthdays. Back home, you get a day off on your birthday to thank God for your birthday that you have come through another year. Here, people work through their birthdays but it's our tradition to thank God for another year and you go to mass and light a candle.

One thing that's similar in the Irish culture is that you like having families which are close. The culture here is very family-oriented. Unlike the US, you can apply to bring your family over here after six months

work. I could get my Mum over here if need be.

The Ulster Hospital is very welcoming. I don't see it as negative. It's always an education to see how the world works. As a Christian, you accept all God's children. The good thing about nursing is that you make vows to serve all patients of all races and cultures. This is the same principle as being a Christian, to serve everyone. So I don't feel guilty about not serving my own country. As long as you work, you are not serving people but serving God. You offer everything to glorify God and you do your best for Him. People here are amazed that I can work here and not be afraid, because I'm a Catholic. But I see religion as just a vessel, what matters is faith and whether you are spiritually growing or not. It doesn't matter if you change religion or in what way you pray. You can worship God in any way. Most of my friends here are Protestants and all that matters is that you believe in Jesus Christ. Mum and Dad brought us up to love Jesus.

My mum has grown in faith too. When we were brought up, Roman Catholics did not read the Bible much but now they are reading it more for themselves. She has started up a charismatic bible study group. All Catholics are starting to read their Bible more. Everyone has a purpose and the hard part is finding out that purpose. There's a phrase in the Psalms: "Sing praises to all nations". That's why I believe I'm here.

This woman continues to live and work in Northern Ireland.