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Working together for Indonesia

Apple is a Filipina graduate student at the Catholic university in Surabaya. She went to Indonesia together with three other women to start the apostolic activities of Opus Dei in the country.

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When the Prelate of Opus Dei announced in November 2007 that stable apostolic work was going to begin in Indonesia, I felt I needed to help in some way, knowing that it

was right below my country and that Indonesians share many traits with the Filipinos, being of the same Malay origin. Although this idea was something remote, and in a corner of my mind, it soon became a decided pursuit. In September 2009, I found myself stepping on Indonesian soil for the first time. I arrived with three other Indonesians who met and joined the Work in other countries while they were doing university studies. Four days after, another from the United States also arrived. Although trips to Jakarta were being made since the 1990's, we settled in Surabaya, the capital of East Java. From Surabaya, we continue to make trips to Jakarta, one hour away by plane, to attend to members of the Work, cooperators and friends.

It did not take long for me to realize that the greatest asset of this land is its people. Everyday, we experience the warmth, the generosity and the

openness of the Indonesians. This was made palpable to me from the very first day when I went to see the university where I was to study the language. The people at the International Office and the language Center gave me a very friendly welcome. Subsequently, I indeed found that everywhere, it is easy to strike a conversation and to meet new friends even as I spoke in my beginners' Indonesian. This happened as I sat to eat my packed lunch at campus, as I studied in the library, and as I rode the *bemo* (public city transport) to and from school. When the people would find out I was a foreigner, they would gladly converse and interest themselves in me. When other *bemo* passengers noticed I was a bit lost, they would all come to my assistance.

But this generosity was already demonstrated long before, by the

couple who own the house where we are staying. They have always been attentive to us, anticipating whatever need, and facilitating our adjustment to our new surroundings. Once when we thanked them, they said that they are just "giving back to God what was truly His in the first place."

Old contacts from previous trips as well as new acquaintances soon became good friends and collaborators. Receiving all sorts of presents and goodies from them especially on our first days here, or simply phone calls to ask how we were, became part of our day. They also tirelessly lent us their help in completing the installation of our new home. A month before I arrived, my three Indonesian companions have settled here to oversee its renovation and start installing it. Thus I arrived to a house that already had the basic furnishings and with a provisional oratory

already set up. Little by little, we worked to complete its installation. Help came in all sorts of ways: cleaning up the place, shopping for things we needed, fixing the library books, as well as setting up the phones and other house equipment. In February this year, the oratory was finally completed. Soon after, the study room was also installed.

At present, I dedicate my time to pursuing higher studies at the Catholic university which is near our house. I am the only foreigner in a class of 18 but from the very first moment, I did not feel different from them. They have taken me in as one more member of the class, such that I can say that I truly feel I belong. They help me learn the language by speaking to me in Indonesian, and they would be very patient with me so I don't get lost in the conversations. Thanks to that, my

knowledge of the language has improved considerably.

From this same university have come our young friends who have begun to take part in the activities of the center. Thanks to a young faithful of the Work who brought her friend to the center when she spend Christmas in Surabaya, her hometown, a stable group of university students and young professionals started participating in the activities. Later on, we found out that a number of them had meet Opus Dei through the Masses held in honor of St. Josemaría at the cathedral of Surabaya in the past two years before we came to the country. St. Josemaría had indeed prepared the way for us.

A striking thing here in Indonesia is the piety of the people. The Indonesians are deeply religious. Whatever their religion is, they practice it faithfully. The Islamic

presence is felt starting 4:30 in the morning when the Muslims' first call to prayer is heard. This would take place four more times during the day until dusk. I had to adjust to seeing mosques and "mushollas" (places of prayer smaller than a mosque) at every corner instead of churches or chapels typical of my Catholic country. The Catholics who comprise about 4% of the Surabayan population of 3 million, are a fervent community. They are involved in one way or another in their parishes and are hungry to know about the faith. The Catholics' love for the sacraments is palpable especially shown in their devotion to the Holy Eucharist and the Sacrament of Confession. On one occasion when a priest mentioned in a talk how little Confession is practiced nowadays, the university students who were around then went to Confession afterwards, some for the first time again in months. I also learn from

the edifying way our Catholic friends live penance not only during Lent but also on any ordinary day to ask for light to see the will of God.

In Indonesia where religious freedom is respected, there is an impressively peaceful coexistence among Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Confucianists. The 12 holidays that are celebrated here throughout the year are a mixture of the feasts of the six official religions. I was amazed when I saw a banner outside the cathedral which greeted the Muslims their *Lebaran* holidays (end of Ramadan). In the same way, I was pleasantly surprised to be greeted by my Muslim classmates a Merry Christmas and a Happy Easter.

There is really so much to learn from the people - from their courteous ways and their refinement and grace whenever they meet persons for the first time. I have learned to meet

people the Javanese way, that is, putting my right hand over my heart after a handshake as a sign of acceptance of the person I just met. I have learned to say "Tidak apa apa" (It's nothing) or "Tidak masalah" (No problem) when thanked for a favor or when some cause of displeasure has been done. I am learning from the serene ways of the Surabayans.

An important part of being one with the people is to share their cuisine especially here where eating is part of every social gathering. Chili sauce is a constant in every Indonesian meal, and little by little, I am learning to put it in small doses on my plate. I am also learning to eat "krupuk" (crackers) with my rice and viand, and to take all sorts of fresh, juicy fruits from this fertile tropical archipelago.

They say that Surabaya has five suns because of the intensity of the heat. I

have had to learn a bit of the science of gardening in order to make sure that our garden which the owner of the house so painstakingly landscaped and filled with plants, will maintain its green and lush despite the high temperatures. One advantage is that it only takes 15 minutes to hand dry the laundry.

There are only five of us in Surabaya for now, and I am reminded of the words of St. Josemaría in 1941 when he was talking to the few women faithful of Opus Dei at that time about the abundant fruit of the apostolate that will come and that they were like a grain of wheat that is taking deep roots which will produce a wheat field.

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