

Missionary's 50 years in the Philippines come to an end



Father Sinnott served mostly in Pagadian, in Mindanao

After more than 50 years, it will be difficult for Irish priest Michael Sinnott to leave the Philippines.

“I was delighted when I got my appointment to the Philippines, and I’ve never been sorry ever since,” he said at a going-away party on Tuesday. “It has been a privilege for me to serve the people of the Philippines.”

But his mission was not always an easy one. On October 11, 2009, the priest was taking a customary walk after dinner on the lawn of his house in Pagadian City when armed men burst through the gate. They snatched the priest and bundled him into a vehicle that was later found burnt in the suburb of Santa Lucia near the sea.

He was held in the forests of the Zamboanga peninsula by suspected Abu Sayyaf militants for a month. Government and Church officials said no ransom was paid, and the rebel group Moro Islamic Liberation Front helped facilitate negotiations for his release. Father Sinnott later said he never felt in any danger from his captives who reportedly said they’d never kill a priest.

Father Michael Sinnott, from County Wexford in southeast Ireland, was ordained in 1954 and assigned to Mindanao, southern Philippines in 1957 where he stayed until 1966, before being reassigned. He returned to the Philippines in 1976.

In 1998, he established Hangop Kabataan (care for youth), a diocese-based rehabilitation program for children with special physical and other needs.

“[Leaving] really was a very difficult decision to make. I realized that I’m going home and not coming back, but I still think I made the right decision,” the priest said. “I will leave a big part of my heart here in the Philippines.”

Pagadian diocese serves 24 towns and one city in the northern and eastern parts of Zamboanga del Sur. About 80 percent of its 861,184 people are Catholics.

After his abduction, Father Sinnott wanted to remain in Mindanao, and in February 2010, after a vacation in Ireland, he said he was happy to be back and looking forward to continuing his work at the charity house.

The Columbans, however, did not allow Father Sinnott to stay in Pagadian, and he has been in Manila for the past two years.

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