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## Lucky me!

by Sr. Rose Pacatte

NCR Today

Last Saturday I traveled from Chiang Mai, Thailand, home to Los Angeles. I was feeling content and energized after participating in a week-long world congress of SIGNIS, the world association for communication. The theme of the gathering was "Children's Rights Tomorrow's Promise." Everything on this trip had gone well.

I wrote about the opening sessions in my October 19 blog post: Catholic professional questions church commitment to communication mission.

Sherry Brownrigg, a radio professional from Omaha, and co-member of the SIGNIS U.S.A. delegation, and I were on the same flights to Los Angeles or so we thought. We were already on the shuttle plane to Bangkok when a Thai Airways person told me I was actually on a later flight. She hurried me off the plane, stapled my boarding pass back together, folded her hands as if in prayer, and indicated the waiting area. I was a little confused and a man told me all flights to Bangkok were full. "But will I be able to make my connection? Is there enough time?" "No worries, madam. Your baggage will make it." Now I was really confused. "But I am not worried about my luggage, I am worried about me!" He, too, joined his hands, smiled, and told me not to worry.

The three hours passed quickly since other congress members were arriving to take flights to the Thai capital for connections. I chatted with a Salesian priest from India about the film "Slumdog Millionaire" (while Indians were offended by the gross outhouse scene when the boy falls into a lake of excrement Western audiences thought it was funny) read newspapers, browsed through the shops.

Once on the correct plane I discovered I had been assigned a bulkhead seat, the kind that have fixed, immovable armrests. I found the seat uncomfortable and asked to change. A Thai lady about my age sat

next to me and we chatted a little as she, too, tried to make herself comfortable. I moved to another seat in the back, and a few moments later, the lady joined me -- laughing because she couldn't really fit in the seat either.

When the plane took off she looked at me, the cruciform emblem of our community hanging from the chain around my neck, and my blue uniform, and said, "You church lady? Sister?" When I said yes, she put her hands together, bowed her head and said, "Oh, I sit next to a sister! Lucky me!" I told her my name was Rose and she told me her name, "Yupa." "Lucky me! You are a flower and my name means 'sun'?"

Yupa asked me about the kind of work I did, and I explained about media literacy and media mindfulness. She said, "We Buddhists think this way, also. It is good to reflect about the media all around us. Lucky me! To sit next to a sister doing this work." Then I asked what kind of work she did; she is a fund-raiser for Buddhist monasteries that need to build or repairs. "Lucky me, Yupa, to meet someone doing such good work." "Do you have to raise money in America?" I assured her that all religions and non-profits had to work to raise money -- even in America.

Since it was a short flight, snack boxes were passed out quickly. Yupa handed me her little sandwich, explaining that it was a Buddhist festival time (Nine Imperial Gods Festival or Vegetarian Festival) and for nine days she could not eat meat. "We do this for blessings for the year," she explained. I said that I had actually ordered a vegetarian meal (I discovered that this made for better traveling). Yupa was thrilled, "Lucky me; we eat the same thing!"

Yupa asked why I was not wearing my veil; I explained that due to an illness it would have been too hot for me to spend three weeks in Singapore and Thailand with my head covered. Realizing this was probably too much information, I tried to put in plain words the benefits of a heat and humidity-resistant indestructible frizzy perm instead. Then she said, "I raise funds; I want to give you something for your fund." She took out 2,000 baht from her purse (about \$60) and placed it in an envelope, saying as she handed it to me, "Lucky me .?" "No, Yupa! Lucky me! You are so kind!"

We sat in silence for a while. I don't know what Yupa was thinking, but I was regretting that I had not followed the advice of one of the older sisters in our community who told us 40 years ago to always have some rosaries, medals, or prayer or inspirational cards in our handbags --to share with those you meet when you travel.? I looked down at my emblem and the little "charm" I had added to it last year. It was of Our Lady of the Sea, a Madonna holding a ship in her hands. It was given to me by the wonderful people who had made the Catholic Film Cruise Retreat a year ago. I removed it from the chain and handed it to Yupa.

I explained that this was Mother Mary and she protects those who travel, like Yupa. Yupa made a rocking motion with her arms, and said, "I know Mary with the Baby. I will add this to my others," Yupa reached inside her blouse and pulled out a small framed Buddha attached to her bra strap with a strong gold chain. She tried to attach the charm to the Buddha but the link was too small. "No matter; it will be safe in here, too?" and she tucked her little portable shrine away, near her heart. (Nanciann and Ann Marie, I am sure you would have paid it forward, too, right?)

As the plane began to descend I told Yupa I would pray for her intentions and asked for her prayers. Yupa asked for prayers for her son, Miki, who was ill. I told her I would ask all the sisters to pray. "Lucky me!?" "No, Yupa, lucky me!?" And she quickly retorted, with a little grin and a twinkle in her eye, as if we had been children together, sisters, and known each other forever, "Lucky me first!?"

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I am happy to say that I not only met up with Sherry for the flight to LAX, but my luggage made it home as well.

In Thai Buddhism, luck or reliance on Buddha amulets for good fortune and prosperity is considered ignorant or a low art. Religious folk in the United States don't often use the secular, "Good luck?"; we wish each other blessings and prayers or the occasional, "Break a leg." And we certainly rely on religious articles for prayer, to stay connected to God through the intercession of Mary and the saints. But there was nothing secular, ignorant or random about Yupa's faith and joy; she meant blessing and grace in the fullest sense of divine providence. She communicated, conferred goodness; she is a blessing.

As a conclusion of a world congress of Catholic communicators who studied ways to promote the rights of children by and through media, meeting Yupa was the confirmation that open and authentic communication can build bridges among people; communication that can transform hearts, minds, communities, societies.

It was a long way to go to be inspired in a totally new way.

Though still mired in jetlag, every time I think of getting bounced off that flight so I could meet Yupa, I feel happy; the sun is shining.

Lucky me! Lucky us.

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