

First Family complete during GMA birthday Mass

LUBAO, Pampanga - For the first time since the marriage of her eldest son at the San Agustin Church here eight years ago, all members of President Arroyo's family were present for her 62nd birthday

Mass held yesterday in the same church.

Conspicuously absent was Pampanga Gov. Ed Panlilio, who reportedly opted to be with Sen. Loren Legarda who

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was inspecting environmental conditions in the wetlands of Candaba town.

But in a text message to The STAR, Panlilio said he would pray for the President's "great-

er health of mind and body."

"May her heart be filled with love and compassion and translate these to her governance," he added.

First Gentleman Jose

Miguel Arroyo, who looked frail beside the President during the Mass, told reporters that "unity of the country" was his birthday wish for his wife.

This was the same appeal

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the President made during her short talk after the Mass. "Those in the government, Church and civil societies

must unite in serving the public," she said in Kapampangan. "These are times that we

need to be united for us to be able to confront the challenges faced by our families and communities," Mrs. Arroyo said, as she underscored the need "to begin a new age of volunteerism and in the spirit of cooperation and unity" to weather the global financial crisis.

She cited the importance of the government, Church and the civic groups coming together, and encouraged all Filipinos to participate in civic-related works.

She said initiatives should be focused on civic activities like cleaning the environment, putting up parks, planting trees and most especially in helping the government to uplift the lives of the most vulnerable sectors of society.

She said that in times like this where the world is facing grave challenges, the Filipino traits of caring and loving are of paramount importance.

Birthdays wishes

Presidential daughter Lull called to make public her birthday wish for her

mom, saying it was "personal."

Camarines Sur Rep. Diosdado "Dato" Arroyo gave his mother pictures of her grandchildren as birthday gift.

The First Gentleman, on the other hand, said he has no material gift for the President, except for his traditional bouquet of 12 roses—11 red ones for love and one white rose for purity.

Meantime, former President Joseph Estrada's birthday wish for President Arroyo is for her to spend her last days in office for the good of poor Filipinos.

In an interview with **The STAR**, Estrada said doing this is Arroyo's only way



President Arroyo waves to the crowd upon her arrival with her granddaughters at the San Agustin Church in Lubao, Pampanga.

to vindicate her administration that has been marked with various anomalies of alleged corruption.

Most industrious President

The President arrived promptly at the 16th century San Agustin Church at 10 a.m. together with Mr. Arroyo, their three children and their spouses, and three granddaughters.

The last time the entire first family was seen together was during the wedding of Rep. Miskey Arroyo in July 2012.

The Mass, officiated by 18 priests led by San Fernando Archbishop Paciano Antonio, was attended by provincial and municipal officials, headed by Vice Gov. Joseph Guiao and several Cabinet members, including Foreign Affairs Secretary Alberto Romulo, Labor Secretary Mariano Roque and Environment Secretary Lito Atienza.

Apart from birthday wishes, the President also got at least 50 watermelons from Candaba Mayor Jerry Pelayo as she inspected a trade fair under Pampanga's "One Town, One Product" program.

Arrieto, who is known to be a close friend of Mrs. Arroyo, described her as "the most industrious" president the country has ever had.

"She is now crossing the threshold of her life," he noted, as he urged churchgoers to pray for the President to enable her to lead the country further through the global crisis.

After the Mass, the President went to the Church grounds and swore in some 200 new members of the Civilian Armed Forces Geographical Unit.

She then distributed food items to some 1,000 local indigents and had lunch at the Church before inspecting the P100 million Diosdado Macapagal Memorial Hospital in Guagua.

From Guagua, the President went to Clark Freeport for a drive through at the new P416.93-million South interchange of the Subic-Clark-Tarlac Expressway at Clark Freeport.

Robert Gervacio, spokesperson of the Basic Conversion Development Authority (BCDA) for the SCTEX project, said the interchange was opened to motorists after the President's drive through.

Gervacio said the southern interchange at Clark was finished by the Japanese contractor HTN Joint Venture last March 25.

He said the project's P416.93 million cost was part of the P6-billion supplemental budget obtained by the BCDA from the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) which also financed the construction of the 93.77-kilometer SCTEX which cost some P27.1 billion.

"The southern interchange will provide a direct link to the SCTEX from Clark, Angeles and Mabalacat," he said.

Last December, interchanges at the northern and the so-called Panday Pira areas of Clark towards the SCTEX also became operational.