

## **FILIPINO WITNESSES OF FAITH**

### **Living Mission in Life**

In this world one often experiences darkness and even despair; there is much pain and suffering. Selfishness and sin may appear to dominate the human landscape. And then, in marvelous and profound ways, light and hope emerge. A new vision of the beauty and meaning of human life breaks forth. God's marvelous presence once again seems to shine out. We experience this renewed hope in the lives of ordinary people, especially those who willingly and generously put their lives at the service of others; *they make faith visible*—even in difficult and uncertain times. These individuals emerge in many unexpected places and at surprising moments. They become beacons of faith, hope and light to those around them. These dedicated “sparks of hope” engender renewed faith in the beauty of life itself, in the beauty of persons. Indeed, our world is *not* bereft of contemporary leaders who are heroes and heralds of faith!

It is always enlightening to read an essay on faith or to search the scriptures for the positive inspiration that they give. A vision of faith provides a fundamental framework for living in complex and difficult times. However, we also deeply appreciate the insights provided by living witnesses who concretize beautiful ideals through their lives. People always prefer a living sample over a lengthy sermon. Concrete witnesses have an effective impact on people. As Paul VI noted: “People today listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if they listen to teachers, it is because they are also witnesses” (EN 41; cf. RM 42). Pope Francis encourages us to actually see authentic “holiness found in our next-door neighbors, those who, living in our midst, reflect God's presence. We might call them ‘the middle class of holiness’” (*Gaudete et Exsultate* 7).

These brief thoughts only serve to set the stage for four short pieces on a variety of “witnesses of faith” and “beacons of light,” leaders who have impacted humanity in recent decades. They are all drawn from the “communion of saints” to which we belong as Christians. In rich and diverse ways, they manifest deep human hope that is profoundly rooted in faith in God—humanity's ultimate anchor in life. In the company of such men and women, we sense a beautiful reality: we share in solidarity because we are not alone; we stand united with these “heroes of faith.”

Read about the lives and hear the words of these four women and men. Reflect on the deep meaning manifested in the often ordinary lives of these living witnesses of the Gospel. Recall the beacons and “pillars of faith” who have personally touched your life. Reverence God for his everlasting, personal love which renews all humanity. Resolve to become, in simple yet profound ways, ambassadors of hope-filled faith in our contemporary, peace-starved world!

### **Saints Lorenzo and Pedro**

#### **Missionary Witnesses of Faith**

The Filipino people rejoice; the nation celebrates. Faith is strengthened; mission continues. These sentiments spontaneously surfaced as Saint Pedro Calungsod was canonized in Rome on October 21, 2012, joining Saint Lorenzo Ruiz who was canonized on October 17, 1987. Remarkably, both of these Filipino saints were canonized on Mission Sunday—exactly twenty-five years apart! They were known as men of deep faith; thus, they are models and witnesses for the largest Christian nation in Asia.

**San Lorenzo Ruiz**, son of a Tagala mother and Chinese father, was born and baptized in Binondo, Manila. He served as a clerk (*escribano*) to his Dominican mentors who taught him how to read and write well. Uncertain historical circumstances forced him to leave Manila in the summer of 1636; he joined the missionaries going to Japan.

A few days after their arrival in Japan they were discovered and arrested; they languished in jail for a year. Later they were tortured and killed. Their bodies were burned and the ashes thrown into the sea. Lorenzo gave a profound testimony of his deep faith: “I am a Christian and I will remain so until the hour of my death.... I must tell you with my whole heart, as God is my witness, that I would rather die a thousand deaths than renounce my faith.” This heroic witness makes Lorenzo a beacon of faith for all Christians.

Data on the life of **Pedro Calungsod** prior to his missionary work is limited. Yet, it is certain that he was a young native of the Visayan region of the Philippines, born around 1655. Probably he received his basic education at a Jesuit boarding school, learning to communicate in Spanish while developing skills in writing, translating, drawing and singing.

Calungsod is one of several young catechists who travelled with some Spanish Jesuit missionaries to the Ladrone Islands (later renamed the “Marianas”) in the Western Pacific in 1668 to evangelize the Chamorros. On April 2, 1672 Calungsod was martyred, along with Jesuit Father Diego Luis de San Vitores, in the village of Tomhom on the island of Guam.

Witnesses said that Pedro had several chances to escape martyrdom; he was young and agile. However, he did not wish to abandon Padre Diego. Others noted that Pedro probably could have defeated his aggressors, but he was unarmed since Padre Diego never allowed his companions to carry weapons. After Pedro was mortally hit with a spear, Padre Diego gave him sacramental absolution; then the assassins also killed Padre Diego (beatified in 1985). Their bodies were thrown into the sea; no remains were ever found.

Many titles could be ascribed to both Lorenzo Ruiz and Pedro Calungsod: dedicated church-worker, young migrant, enthusiastic missionary, faithful friend, unwavering martyr. However, as the canonization of both saints was held on World Mission Sunday (1987 and 2012), the Church emphasizes the *missionary* dimension of their heroic witness of faith. Already in the 1600s Lorenzo and Pedro exemplified the words of Saint Pope John Paul II: “I wish to tell you of my special desire: that Filipinos

will become the foremost missionaries of the Church of Asia.” Committed faith—even in the face of death—is a profound source of genuine Christian witness!

### **Cardinal Jaime Sin Prophet of Peace and Hope**

Widely loved and revered, Cardinal Sin, the third Filipino archbishop of Manila [Reyes-Santos-Sin], achieved in his lifetime an incredible amount of good—socially, politically, morally, culturally, religiously. His great contributions did not spring from his desire for success or notoriety; rather, the source was the cardinal’s daily living of his episcopal motto: *Serviam*. When he declared, “I serve,” he meant it with all his heart and strength; his motto became a program of commitment, action, and generous service.

One could list some of the accomplishments of the late cardinal: youngest member of the college of cardinals that elected two popes in 1978, nemesis-deposer of two corrupt presidents, spiritual leader of the world’s third-largest local Church, first cardinal to visit China after it reopened in the late 1970s, recipient of over two dozen honorary doctorates, the conscience of a nation, and beacon of hope in the dark days of martial law.

Would another type of enumeration capture the uniqueness of the person? This writer allowed his imagination free reign and discovered several descriptive words, all beginning with the letter “p” that seem quite adequate to capture the “soul” of the man. Yes, Sin was priest, pastor, prophet, patriot, patron, and preacher. He was people-power-promoter, pope-elect, pun-maker, politician-challenger, and pro-poor-allay. Sin was a peace-advocate, prayer-leader, president of the CBCP, and a pious Marian devotee. Each descriptive title or accolade reflects just one more opportunity through which he lived his motto: *serviam*: “I serve as priest, pastor, prophet, patriot.... I come to serve.”

Often it is said that the litmus test of a good, pastoral bishop is his relationship with his own priests; pastoral ministry flourishes when there is bishop-clergy harmony. During his seven years as bishop in Jaro and his thirty-one years in Manila, Sin was genuinely appreciated by his own clergy. A brief public statement by the clergy of the Archdiocese of Manila, entitled “A Prophet in Our Midst” (February 21, 2001) is a heartfelt testimony.

The statement, while expressing the clergy’s admiration and love of their bishop, also captured the widespread sentiments of the Catholic faithful: “There is a prophet in our midst. He is Jaime Cardinal Sin. He is a courageous prophet, bold in proclaiming the truth, steadfast and unwavering in delivering the message of God to his people. In being our modern-day prophet he suffers. He is irreverently branded many names. He is ridiculed for upsetting people in power. He is maligned for bringing down to the reality of everyday life the Good News of our faith. Through all this he fearlessly stands his ground, even if he is a lonely voice crying out in the wilderness. This is because he stands on holy ground and his mind and heart are fixed on the people he loves, the flock God has given him to shepherd.”

The statement continues: “A heroic and grace-filled prophet is rare, like a precious stone mined from the deep. But God has blessed us and put a prophet in our midst. Our prophet led us through two peaceful revolutions, peaceful uprisings of prayer and indignation against lies, corruption and the abuses of power. Like a father, he firmly held our hand as we walked through the darkness of crisis in our nation’s leadership and governance.... He is, to us, the greatest Cardinal in the world. He is our pastor and friend; our patriarch and brother; a priest and patriot. A prophet.” Cardinal Sin, heartfelt thanks for restoring hope to a struggling nation! You said *serviam* and lived it to the full! You have shown us what “living and serving the faith” means in our daily lives!

### **Corazon C. Aquino** **Blazing and Serene Hope**

“Cory” Aquino served as the seventh president of the Republic of the Philippines (1986-1992); she was the first woman to hold that office as well as the first female president in Asia. Her husband, Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino Jr. had been the opponent of strongman Ferdinand Marcos. Ninoy was assassinated on August 21, 1983 upon his return from three years of exile in the United States. The couple’s son, Benigno Aquino III (popularly known as “P-Noy”), was elected president and sworn in on June 30, 2010 and served until 2016.

Maria Corazon Sumulong Cojuangco was born in 1933 in Tarlac Province to a wealthy banking and political family. After her basic education in the Philippines, she graduated from Mount Saint Vincent College in New York with a bachelor’s degree in both mathematics and French. She married in 1954 and had four daughters and one son. “Cory” described herself as a “plain housewife.” However, after the assassination of her husband, she went on to lead the opposition against the Marcos administration. In late 1985, when Marcos called for a snap election, she ran for president. Cheated in the election, she called for massive civil disobedience. Events eventually led to the ousting of Marcos, and she was installed as President on February 25, 1986 through the “People Power Revolution.”

During her six years as president, Aquino fended off several coup attempts by Marcos supporters and struggled to address the country’s economic problems. She oversaw the promulgation of a new constitution in 1987; she emphasized human rights and civil liberties; she promoted peace talks with communist insurgents and Muslim secessionists. In 1992 she was succeeded by her former defense secretary, Fidel Ramos. In 2008 she learned that she had colon cancer; she passed away on August 1, 2009.

In the many volumes of the *Speeches of President Corazon C. Aquino*, one often is struck by Cory’s faith and hope. She noted the aptness of the phrase “People’s Power,” but said that a better term might be “Prayer Power” (June 6, 1986). “And it is by faith that we proceed on the longer journey we have yet to take to bring progress, prosperity and justice to our land” (March 12, 1987). Cory spoke of the values that guided her life

and should distinguish the Filipino nation: “faith in God and in the power of prayer, industry and honesty, love of country, and respect for the unity of the family” (June 18, 1988).

The vision that guided Cory Aquino is beautifully expressed in her address, entitled “Honor and Pain, Courage and Faith,” which she delivered on May 19, 1984 when she received her first honorary doctorate from her *alma mater* Mount Saint Vincent College. She noted how she and Ninoy were given a “blazing and serene hope” in the midst of darkness. She said: “For me this blazing and serene hope is founded on Faith in the One who died for love and rose again and who has always been part of my life.” She noted that Ninoy and she “were nurtured in a Faith that begets courage blazing with hope among a people so often tested by tribulation. And, how often I have seen courage and hope blazing out of the Faith of my people, especially in our darkest hours.” Note that these words were spoken two years before the 1986 “People Power” revolution.

Without ambiguity, Cory anchored her life and mission in the faith, prayer, courage and hope that shaped her life. One may validly assert that the few quotes cited here exemplify her personal spirituality as well as her spirituality of leadership. In a word, Cory proved to be a genuine leader, a beacon of Christian faith.

**Reflection Questions:** Are you inspired by Lorenzo Ruiz’s statement: “I would rather die a thousand deaths than renounce my faith”? Could you make the same statement yourself? Why is Pedro Calungsod a model of committed service? How can Filipinos become, in the words of John Paul II, “the foremost missionaries of the Church of Asia”? What do you know about the “people-power” EDSA non-violent revolution in 1986, and, what role did Cardinal Sin play in those events? What qualities in Cory Aquino do you admire most? How did Cory’s faith help her to live out her “mission” to lead the Philippines—even in the midst of many challenges?

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