

FILIPINOS AND MISSIONARY EVANGELIZATION

Witnesses to the Nations

This module provides a wide collection of mission experiences of Filipinos around the world—priests, religious men and women, and laity. It also briefly describes the two indigenous Filipino mission societies. Here we get glimpses of “mission-in-action”! In addition, we recall those challenging words spoken by John Paul II to Filipino Catholics during his 1981 visit: “I wish to tell you of *my special desire: that the Filipinos will become the foremost missionaries of the Church in Asia.*” Read the stories; be inspired; take time to reflect; share your insights with others; ask yourself about your own commitments!

Giving One’s Life in Service. On October 17, 1996, Filipino Jesuit Scholastic Richard M. Fernando, known to all as “Richie,” laid down his life for his friends at the Jesuit Refugee Service’s school of the disabled called *Bantay Priebe* (Center of the Dove), near Phnom Penh, Cambodia. A disturbed student was about to throw a hand grenade into a classroom of other students. Richie grabbed him from behind. The grenade fell to the ground and exploded. Richie was killed instantly, while everyone else survived.

Five days earlier, on October 12, 1996, in the midst of the bustle of his mission work, Richie e-mailed his close friend, Totet: “*Pero, alam mo, to be honest, I don’t feel like stopping. I honestly feel inspired to face the problems, the people, the truth though difficult and painful. In other words, Tet, I know where my heart is ... it is with Jesus Christ ... Jesus who gave His all for the poor, the sick, the orphans, etc. I feel as if I’m beginning to understand more when I say, I want to be like Christ. I will follow Jesus. I am Jesus’ friend and companion. I am a Jesuit. I know where my heart is....*”

“I am confident and inspired—even though I feel tired physically, mentally, and emotionally at times—I am confident that God never forgets his people, our disabled brothers and sisters. And, I am glad that God has been using me to make sure that our brothers and sisters know this fact. I am convinced that this is my vocation and mission.... I honestly believe that to die for our friends here will be the greatest gift that God can give us. And, I continually pray for that grace every day.” **Source: *Tell the World* (J. Kroeger), Appendix 6**

Seeing Muslims as Neighbors. Before I became a Franciscan, I thought I would just be a mere spectator in the arena of Muslim-Christian Dialogue. However, after my first year in theology, I found myself dialoguing with Muslim and Christian brethren. Before I became involved, I had biases and historical prejudices against the Muslims. My experiences with them, though short-lived, made a big impact on my life; I treasure having had the opportunity to mingle and relate with our Muslim brothers and sisters with openness.

In November 1995, I was invited by a Muslim friend (an ex-MNLF member) to visit the place where the MNLF live. Getting to the area was about thirty-minute ride by pump boat. Without hesitation I went with him. Honestly, I was nervous and my knees were trembling; these feelings doubled when we arrived in the place and were welcomed by armed men. I was introduced to their community; we had a sharing and after lunch I went back to the friary. I was

the first friar who visited that place; later I was followed by some of our seminarians. Indeed, it is a risky place, but also a very good area for exposure in building Muslim-Christian relations.

In this process, I gained friends (Muslim and Christian); the experience was a memorable one: an experience that opened my eyes to dialogue, not only on issues of faith and religion but also on the concerns of human development and dignity. Because of these personal experiences, I discovered that dialogue has many levels ranging from a deepened awareness of the other to real involvement in a variety of social issues. **Source: *Father Cesar C. Malasa, OFM***

Faithful Love Serves. Let me tell you about a certain Ate Melanie. I remember watching her when her son, Jojo, was stricken with tetanus. She seemed desperate when she asked me to give him the Anointing of the Sick. It struck me that her son's every spasm of pain also registered on her face and body. She was always by his side, forgoing eating or sleeping, except when she was mildly scolded by her older siblings. From her I saw the power of a parent's love. It is a power that enables one to share in a loved one's pain. If Jojo was celebrating a happy moment, you would see his happiness on her face too. Also, that power enables a person to endure, even cast aside, one's own suffering or hardship to bring relief to a loved one. Consider this: Ate Melanie, sleepless and hungry, always pestering her son's doctor and nurses so that her son would be saved from death. Jojo eventually recovered. Only then did I see a smile on Ate Melanie's face. I often think of Ate Melanie when I think of mission. The love that impelled her to go through anything is to me symbolic of God's love that pushes us into mission. **Source: *Father Eutiguio B. Belizar, Jr.***

Eucharist Empowers Mission. I was struck by the sharing of one of our lay missionaries who felt that when she committed her life to full-time mission work, she felt a new enthusiasm to go to Mass daily. In the past, before her mission commitment, she simply participated in the Sunday Mass out of obligation for fear of committing a sin. Her daily life was reduced to routine of work. Her participation in the daily Mass, however, made her encounter Jesus personally and this experience made a difference in the way she taught her students; this made her ready to welcome every difficulty in her life with serenity. She felt more strongly the love of God in her life. It is this personal love of Jesus that gave her the passion to work for mission. **Source: *Father Andrew Recepcion***

Proclaiming God's Power of Love. One day a priest was asked by the most special woman in his life, who was none other than his own biological mother, a very simple, uncomplicated yet thought-provoking question. Before asking him she said, "Please pardon me, my son, for asking you this question, but I must do it, for if I don't ask it now, then when?" Looking serious but calm, she then asked him, "My son, why did you decide to become a priest?" Mesmerized and awestruck by the question, the son pondered for a minute and cunningly replied to his mom in a form of another question: "Ma, why did you marry Pa?" The question surprised the mother and made her speechless for some time. After gaining her composure, direct from the heart, she straightforwardly told her son, "I married your papa because I loved him with all my heart, and my love for him has not changed even just a bit since then; it remains the same until now and will be until the end." The son answered back saying, "The same is true with me, ma; I decided to become a missionary priest, because I loved God and His people; my love for God remains the same as ever. And, should my love be lacking in

intensity and power, I would always humbly pray to Him to increase my love.” **Source:** *Father Alex Abiera, LRMS*

Spreading the Gospel of Joy. My recent visit to Tel Aviv showed me the meaning of mission as joyful sharing of faith and love. In Tel Aviv the Sisters of Saint Paul de Chartres are working with Filipino migrant workers. Despite the ongoing war between Hamas and the Israelis, they continue their mission. One Saturday afternoon, I witnessed three Masses fully packed with Filipinos. The liturgy was alive, the choir sounded like a band, all participated in the singing, and the smiling faces of Filipinos filled the whole place. During the offertory procession, the overflowing baskets with shekels showed tremendous generosity. After each Mass the never ending stories and laughter were everywhere. The Israeli who drove the priest for the Mass and waited for him remarked: “Filipinos are poor, but they are happy and generous.” Here is the genuine missionary witnessing of the Gospel of Joy! **Source:** *Sister Helen Malubay, SPC*

Discovering Meaning in Life. Jessa is a young person who is very active in youth ministry. For a time, she was very visible in organizing national events for young people. For her zeal in youth ministry, she was asked to assume one of the key responsibilities in the whole youth movement. She willingly delivered.

One day, the priest in-charge expressed to her an invitation to the mission in Papua New Guinea, particularly to help in the organization of its youth ministry. She responded: “Father, it is not easy to say ‘Yes,’ but I do not want to say ‘No.’ Can you give me time to reflect and consult God about it?” And, she seriously thought about it.

After some days, the priest followed her up: “So, what came out in your discernment?” She answered, “Father, I have consulted everyone in the family and some friends in the ministry. I have prayed much. I spent a long time reflecting on the will of God. And, I realized that deep inside me there is this desire to do something greater for God because I love Him, and providentially, this ‘greater’ seems to be the call to mission. And I couldn’t think of anything bigger than that. So, I have made a decision to work for the youth of Papua New Guinea. I will go.” **Source:** *Father Joseph L. Vivo, SDB*

From Bukidnon to Rome. I am Rudy, thirty-nine years old from Malaybalay, Bukidnon in Mindanao. I have been in Rome for about twelve years already, in order to earn for my family. I have three children and am happily married.... Almost every morning, before going to work I would pass by Saint Mary Major Basilica to pray where the Blessed Sacrament is exposed. My chaplain told me that he was impressed upon seeing me there whenever he would pass by the Blessed Sacrament....

One day he waited for me and asked my name and whether I am married or not. I said, “Yes, Father. I am happily married.” Then laughingly he warned me: “Be careful, Rudy, here in Rome there are so many chicks and if you’re not careful you may fall. Keep yourself strong!” I told him: “Well, you know Father, this is the reason why I’m going to the Blessed Sacrament, because knowing my weakness, I ask for strength from the Lord. I am aware that there are many

temptations here in Rome. Though the girls know that I am already married, they would still lure me to infidelity.”

Then I took off the ring from my finger and showed to Father what’s written inside my ring. On one side there was this word inscribed “always.” On the other side was the word “never.” So, “always / never”! Father Buddy asked me what I meant. With a smile I explained to him: “You see, Father, ‘always’ means I will always love you, and ‘never’ means I will never forsake you.” And then, I would kiss my ring! But, I realized that it’s not enough. I need to pray! And, that is why I pass by the Blessed Sacrament”! **Source: *Pinoys on the Move* (Remo Bati, SDB)**

Sent Off to Africa. Every missionary would tell you that he has had struggles at some point in time. In my case an exceptionally supportive father had made the road less traveled a lot easier. “If you want to become a missionary,” he told me once, “be like a doctor, counselor, lawyer and everything you can be. People will go to you. You need to give your best.” Days before I left for Africa, this aging inspiration of mine was at his darn best as I again asked for his blessing.

“Go ahead,” he almost whispered in his distinct affectionate way, “and never look back home with hesitation whatever happens. If I die while you’re away, you won’t have to pack your bags to send me off.” He waited eighteen years from the day he gave me the green light to mission work before passing away—just months ahead of my mother who was the other significant person in my vocation as a lay missionary.

Looking back [after eighteen years], my mission journey would be like footprints of yesterdays, while my tomorrows would be in the hands of God. I always felt God’s presence during difficult and happy times. What more could I ask—with rich experiences, good family, and the countless friends I have had? **Source: Virginia Q. Deleña**

“Philippine-born” Mission Societies

In the past five decades, under the guidance of the befriending Spirit, two indigenous missionary societies of apostolic life have emerged in the Philippines; they are initiatives of inculturated local Churches committed to evangelization. Significantly, these societies have been founded in the Vatican II era. They are the Mission Society of the Philippines: MSP (1965) and the Lorenzo Ruiz Mission Society: LRMS (1997). These missionary communities reflect a specific charism: Mission Society of Apostolic Life. Three characteristics describe their unique identity and mission contribution: *Ad Gentes*, *Ad Exteros*, and *Ad Vitam*.

Such societies direct their efforts of evangelization *ad gentes* (to those who have not yet heard the liberating and salvific Good News of Jesus Christ), *ad exteros* (to peoples outside their own country, cultural milieu, and language group), and *ad vitam* (through a life-long commitment to this unique form of missionary witness). A very brief description of each society follows; they are significant instruments of placing Filipino missionaries in *ad gentes* mission.

Mission Society of the Philippines. On the fourth centenary of the evangelization of the Philippine Islands (1565-1965) the Catholic Hierarchy declared that “to express in the concrete our gratitude to God for the gift of our Faith we will organize the Foreign Mission Society of the Philippines.” The official or statutory name of the society is: Mission Society of the Philippines (MSP), often popularly referred to as “Fil-Mission.” It is now a pontifical Filipino clerical mission society of apostolic life.

The MSP defines its charism in these words: “In love and gratitude to the Father, ours is a joyful missionary spirit flowing from deep union with Christ through Mary and in the power of the Holy Spirit, willing to spend and be spent in sharing His Gospel to all.” Membership in the MSP is open to natural-born Filipinos; the Society also welcomes Filipino diocesan priests as associate members to serve in foreign mission. The MSP considers its mission apostolate in *de jure* and *de facto* mission territories as its foremost duty and privilege. Asia has always been the highest priority in the choice of mission apostolates. In the assessment of the MSP leadership, *ad gentes* mission has also brought fulfillment and “success” as seen in the “real contact and dialogue of life with the poor, the sick, the old and neglected” and in effective work with Filipino migrants.

Lorenzo Ruiz Mission Society. In 1949 during civil disturbances in China, the Saint Joseph Regional Seminary which was under Jesuit administration was transferred to Manila. In the ensuing years about 60 Chinese seminarians were ordained in the Philippines; they went on to found 14 Filipino-Chinese parishes and 18 Filipino-Chinese schools. To facilitate the continuation of these apostolates and to recruit and train younger clergy, Jaime Cardinal Sin of Manila established the Lorenzo Mission Institute (a Filipino-Chinese seminary) in 1987. Pope John Paul II requested Cardinal Sin to help prepare missionaries for China; during his January 1995 sojourn in Manila, he visited this seminary, instructing the Cardinal to “maintain and preserve the said seminary at all cost.”

In this context the Lorenzo Ruiz Mission Society (LRMS) has been formed; it received its decree of approval from Cardinal Sin on January 14, 1997. It is a clerical society of apostolic life of diocesan right with its ecclesiastical seat in the Archdiocese of Manila. The LRMS draws its inspiration from Saint Lorenzo Ruiz, the first Filipino saint who was of mixed Filipino-Chinese descent. He was martyred in Japan where he went as a lay catechist with Spanish Dominican friars in the 1600s. The LRMS is “intrinsically and eminently missionary in spirit and finality.” The members are committed to the Church in China, the Filipino-Chinese Apostolate, and other overseas Chinese Communities. **Source: *FABC Papers 88* (J. Kroeger)**

Reflection Questions: How does each of these stories manifest both faith and mission? Which narratives spoke personally to you; why was this true? Share a personal experience of how someone’s strong faith and life witness have inspired you.

[J. Kroeger]