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Brothers in Communion with the Poor

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[In this conference Br. Karl Gaspar presents Oblate Brother Mauricio ZUYCO as an example of a religious brother who is close to the poor and sure of his identity. The author's considerations may contribute to our own ongoing reflection on the vocation of the Brothers. – Sub-titles added by the editor.]

It is very significant that we gather as Brothers here in Bacolod City in time for the Masskara Festival. ["Mass" means people and "kara" face. A festival where revelers don elaborate masks and costumes and dance to Latin rhythms Mardi Gras style.] It provides a symbol useful in probing and celebrating the identity of the Brothers. Bacolod City is of course the gateway to the island of Negros.

When we hear the name Negros I am sure various images appear in our minds whether or not this is the first time we visit this island. There is the image of the "social volcano" popularized by the former Bishop of the Diocese of Bacolod Bishop Antonio Fortich. For anthropologists and historians there is the image of Papa Isiao the legendary revolutionary hero whose sacred space in Mt. Kanlaon is akin to Hermano Pule's Mt. Banahaw.

There is also the enduring image of the contrast between the rich landlords and the oppressed *sacada* the migratory agricultural workers from Antique whose lives have been chronicled in dramatic documentaries such as the explosive book of Fr. Junie Jesena S.J. entitled *The Sacadas of Negros* which appeared in the early 70's.

As Bro. Armin mentioned [...]there is also the image of that boy whose emaciated face appeared on the cover of *Asiaweek* revealing the massive extent of hunger and malnutrition here in Negros during *los tiempos muertos* the last years of the autumn of the dictatorship of Marcos when the price of sugar collapsed. I remember that period vividly because 1985 was the year I did my postulancy among the *sacadas* in La Granja just outside Bacolod in a sugar cane plantation owned by one of Marcos' cronies.

Given these images I find it most appropriate to share some thoughts and reflections on the topic that was assigned to me namely "Brothers in Communion with the Poor." If there is one place in the country where poverty in its stark reality can face you squarely in the eye it is here in Negros. If there is one spot in the entire archipelago where a Brother can truly be in communion with the poor it is here in Negros – the land of contrasts and contradictions. The leitmotif of the mask – as embodied in the theatre's iconic symbol of the masks of joy and sorrow – is a fitting symbol of this island.

The mission in Kulaman

However allow me not to talk about the poor of Negros but of another place – in Kulaman Sultan Kudarat – where I am now based as part of the Redemptorist Itinerant Mission Team (RIMT). In the process of familiarizing you with this setting I will tell the story of a Brother whose life in communion with the poor reveals a Brother's identity that we should imitate and celebrate.

Kulaman is a plateau located in the Cotabato Cordillera that traverses Maguindanao Sultan Kudarat and South Cotabato. It is part of the homeland the ancestral domain of the Dulangan Manobo people indigenous to this area. In the adjacent areas are the homelands of the Teduray the T'boli and the Maguindanaon Muslims.

It has been renamed as the municipality of Senator Ninoy Aquino although most people – Manobo and settlers – still refer to it as Kulaman. Until the late 1950's Kulaman's population was composed solely of the Manobos. From the late 1950's until the 1960's Ilocanos and Pangasinenses migrated from the coastal areas of Lebak and Kalamansig to this plateau dreaming the Mindanawon dream of acquiring a piece of land to till.

In the 1970's when the logging companies penetrated this area the second wave of migrants settled in this plateau namely the Ilonggos Karay-as and Capizeños. In the 1990s it was the turn of the Cebuanos coming from other parts of Mindanao including Davao and Zamboanga.

Today Kulaman has a population of roughly 40000 with only 8000 Manobos. They have been displaced from their homeland as the forests have vanished. Today in the midst of dazzling landscapes and awe-inspiring scenery that is some of the most beautiful on this side of Mindanao poverty is the lot of the majority of the people both Manobos and settlers.

A Brother came to Kulaman

It was in the mid-1980s that a Brother came to Kulaman and his lifework and witness as a religious Brother constitute the stuff of legends. He continues to be beloved by the people of Kulaman long after he left the place in the late 1990s. His story is already woven into the oral history of this plateau and everyone – both Manobo and settler – remember him fondly.

Everyone knew he was a Brother and they called him by that name. That name could easily be KUYA for those coming from Luzon MANONG or MANOY for the Bisaya and KAKAY for the Manobo. He was everywhere around the parish; he walked all of its roads and trails to reach out to the people especially the poor. In the decade that he was assigned to this place his heart was always aflame with the desire to be in communion with the poor and he did everything he could to be at their service.

When I first arrived in Kulaman in June 2001 I immediately found out that he was a legend in this place. When I introduced myself as a Brother; they didn't ask anymore what was the difference between a priest and a Brother whether I was proceeding on to the priesthood or not and all those questions that at times can be irritating. [...] In such a rare setting I met a people who understood the vocation of a religious Brother.

Bro. "Mau"

Indeed thanks to Br. Mauricio (or Mau) ZUYCOOMI the identity of a Brother is quite clear in Kulaman. And we are privileged to have Bro. Mau with us here today at this assembly.

Bro. Mau is from this island specifically Kawayan Negros Occidental. He was born here on February 8 1938. When he was nine years old his parents migrated to Marbel now known as Koronadal City. When he was twenty years old he joined the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. His first profession was in 1960 and his final profession in 1967.

Before coming to Kulaman in the mid-1980's he worked in the Notre Dame school of Marbel the Notre Dame Press and among the Teduray in Upi. He assisted in setting up the Notre Dame schools of Tubuan Fantil Mandalay Kabug-kabug Blala and Upi-Nuro. He even did work as assistant Vocation Director.

Bro. Mau in Kulaman

But it was in Kulaman that Bro. Mau reached his full potential and in the process carved out an identity of a religious Brother that is first and foremost rooted in the Gospel's call to be in communion with the poor. Along with his OMI confreres he responded to the urgent needs of the Manobo through adult literacy community-based and agricultural development projects as well as assisting them in defending their ancestral domain from the encroachment of land-hungry migrants and logging companies.

However he was also very much concerned with the welfare of the migrant settlers. At a time when the government was quite slow in responding to the educational needs of the children Bro. Mau brought together concerned citizens and together they put up the Notre Dame school of Kulaman in 1986.

Both the poverty situation and the massive deforestation pushed him to become engaged in ecological projects. He urged the people to plant fruit trees like jackfruit durian rambutan pomelo and avocado and trees to bring back the forests like narra luan bagrass and eucalyptus. This became a passion as he himself planted hundreds of trees. Today the once barren hill on which the church was built is an oasis of trees which have produced seeds that became seedlings that became trees to protect the watershed.

By the time Bro. Mau wrapped up his decade-long ministry among the poor Manobos and settlers as well as defending Mother Nature there Kulaman was no longer the same place as when he arrived there in 1985. Before he moved on to a new assignment in the island of Bato-bato part of the Sulu islands that the Oblates serve this time to administer to the Tausog Sama D'laut and Christian settlers he had served the people of Kulaman well. And their grateful hearts always remember so that whenever Bro. Mau comes to Kulaman for a rare visit there is a spontaneous fiesta to honor him. Years from now when all of us will have disappeared from the face of this earth I would not be surprised if the people would canonize him as San Mauricio de Kulaman.

The story of Bro. Mau is instructive for the theme of our convention. Through his life and witness Bro. Mau has probed into as well as celebrated his identity as a Brother. Having personally seen the fruits of the unfolding of this identity I am very much convinced that this is the same identity that would help all of us promote nurture and deepen our vocation as Religious Brothers. During this post-modern era when the question of identity has become a central issue for individuals communities groups and even peoples we as Brothers would benefit from appropriating an identity forged in the actual commitment made by Brothers like Bro. Mau among and in communion with the poor.

A diversity of ministries and services

Today there are many Bro. Maus in our midst here in the Philippines. There are other Brothers working among the *lumad* (native peoples) – the Marist Brothers in Palawan and South Cotabato the Claretian Brothers in Basilan and Ipil the Franciscan Brothers in Zamboanga del Sur. There are Brothers working with street children and youth in trouble with the law like the Brothers who set up and run the Kuya Center in Quezon City which might lead in the words of Bro. Dennisto the founding of the Kuya Brothers with Chad as the first novice.

There are also Brothers working with the sick and training health workers like the Alexians the Sons of Mary and the Hospitaller Brothers. There are Brothers attached to formal school systems responding to the need to train poor students to acquire agricultural vocational and technical skills in order to assist them in combating poverty. The extension programs of our schools run by Brothers have become bridges to a brighter future for the poor communities we serve like the one Bro. Vince is administering here in Bacolod.

There are many many more on the list and thank God the list is increasing. We are not wanting in models and actual concrete experiences of Brothers who have shown a deep capacity to be in communion with the poor. Since even before Vatican II until today there have been Brothers who have shown us the way to follow in Jesus' footsteps. As they actually took the journeys towards fulfilling their mission they consequently forged an identity that was clear in the eyes of the very same people that Jesus himself served in his own lifetime.

Roots of the Brother's identity

Today in the midst of globalization that Bishop Chito Tagle has morally defined as rootless (*walang ugat*) ruthless (*walang awa*) and futureless (*walang kinabukasan*) and in view of the many exhortations of Church documents from Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II) to *Vita Consecrata* we the Religious Brothers in the Philippines are called to reclaim and re-appropriate an identity which at its heart is rooted in the Gospel challenge to serve the least of our brothers and sisters the poor and oppressed in our midst Jesus' *anawim* in today's world.

In this regard it is important for us to anchor our visions as Brothers in both our time-space context and in our faith-vocation context.

There is only one space on which we can ground our visions namely the space occupied by the very source of light we seek. John reminds us who occupies this space. "All things came to be through him and without him nothing came to be. What came to be through him was life and this life was the light of the human race; the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it." (John 1: 3-5).

Our visions can embody this light because our very own identity is rooted in Jesus the source of light as our brother. We are Brothers because Jesus is our brother – Jesus is our “Kuya” “Manong” “Manoy” “Kakay”. This is a cultural context that is potentially a rich mine for theologizing on the Brother's identity. (For this reason we hope more superiors will send Brothers to study theology so that we need not rely on clerics to theologize about our vocation). As Jesus exhorts everyone to be brother and sister to one another we follow Him and do as He commands. As Jesus is brother to all we too can be Brothers to everyone especially the most abandoned. [...]

Vita Consecrata states that Brothers take part in the "mission of proclaiming the gospel and bearing witness to it with charity in the everyday life" (No. 60) In our every day life Jesus is the farmer in the field the laborer in the marketplace the slum-dweller the street-children.

With our brother Jesus as model we have the audacity to evolve visions that can be a source of light for others. As we relate to Jesus our brother we also link ourselves in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in need. In the words of Bro. Joel Giallanza CSC: "Through our relationship to the Lord we demonstrate the possibility of living the example of Jesus in today's world... (characterized by) selflessness... and service to others... To do what brothers do is a clear expression of the importance necessity and urgency of Jesus' example for today."¹

Promoting peace and unity – Relationships

One concrete response to the challenge of becoming more grounded in our communion with the poor involves internalizing a vision to establish relationships with people that demonstrate the possibility of living in peace and unity. Giallanza has these words to offer: "The rich diversity represented in social political religious cultural and ethnic differences is too often used as a basis for creating divisions among people. And as the barriers supporting those divisions become stronger mutual destruction appears more effective and efficient than cooperative dialogue. Conflict violence war then become the usual ways of dealing with differences in life. To do what brothers do means making every effort to show that the differences among people are graces and blessings to be celebrated not burdens and bothers to be shunned."² In this regard we can pick up on what Bro. Armin said yesterday referring to the challenge for us to denounce George Bush's proposed war on Iraq as was suggested by the esteemed *Inquirer* columnist Conrado de Quiros.

Bro. David Werthmann CSsR adds to this reflection: "Religious life has always existed as a prophetic response to society's needs at a particular time. Today's world is full of broken relationships: physical emotional and sexual abuse; political strife and war. Certainly among the greatest needs in contemporary society is the witness of people coming together in community living a shared faith supporting one another's personal growth and well-being working side by side in relative peace and harmony growing close to each other...and to the Lord."³

True fraternity

Closer to home and situating himself within the reality of AsiaBro. Armin Luistro FSC posits: "The scandals of division even in multi-racial and multi-cultural Asia bring to the fore the prophetic witness values of a community lived in authentic brotherhood. Almost all forms of violence in the region are hatched and perpetuated by a male-dominated military or pseudo-military organization which corrupts the true meaning of fraternity. Societal and Church structures are too hierarchical and tend to emphasize power more than servicework more than relationshipsaccomplishments more than personhood. It is easy for Religious brothers to fall into this same trap."⁴

In concrete terms this vision calls on Brothers to be engaged in the various movements that help to bring forth harmony among various groups whose differences have led to conflicts. In our country and the neighboring countries this includes conflicts between people of various races and ethnic groupsreligions and faith traditionsclasses and cultures. Male chauvinism and patriarchal structures that have oppressed women have also led to gender tensions and conflicts. If we are Brothers imbued with this visionwe must engage in movements for inter-faith and inter-ethnic dialogue and gender sensitivity! Such engagements do not necessarily involve high-profile interventions that demand much financial and technical resources. Some of the best inter-faith dialogue initiatives today are done in terms of the ministry of presenceof being immersed among the ordinary folks and doing ordinary things together in everyday life.

Being an elder brother

This vision can also be linked to our prevailing culture where an older brother is called "Kuya" or "Manong". In many Asian cultures the eldest brother occupies a very important role. In the absence of parents it is the eldest brother whom the parents commission to look after the younger ones. Long after the younger brothers and sisters have families of their own the "Kuya" still monitors their well-beingmaking sure that they are never lacking of their basic needs. In Pauline terms the religious brother is "the firstborn among many brothers." (Rom 8:29). In the words of *Vita Consecrata*: "The religious are called to be brothers of Christdeeply united with him...; brothers to one another in mutual love and working together in the Church in the same service of what is good; brothers to everyone in their witness to Christ's love for allesspecially the lowliestthe neediest; brothers for a greater brotherhood in the Church" (No. 60).

Solidarity with the most abandoned

Once more this vision is concretized wherever the Brothers are able to express this solidarity with the most abandoned who are also the most marginalized. In some instances this could involve responding directly to those who are hungry by offering hot soupto the sick by treating their illness to the prisoners by visiting them in jailto those without homes by offering shelter. But other Brothers might respond to the structural causes of the impoverishment of the poor by involving themselves in justicepeace and the integrity of creation. Whether their involvement has short or long-term impact the Brothers show compassion by serving the poor.

Not a non-cleric

There is indeed a need for us to project a positive and better-defined identity in terms of following Jesus in our vowed lives. Until today Brothers grappled with an identity crisis manifested by the problem of identity projection. For such a long time we and other people have defined our identity in negative terms: we are non-clerics we are un-ordained we are not seminarians or Cursillistas. In other words we make people understand who a Brother is by what he does. All these have consequently led to ambiguities as to who the Brothers really are. It has been referred to as "blessed ambiguity" which is also the title of a book that came out of a Brotherhood seminar sponsored by the Conference of Major Superiors of Men and the National Assembly of Religious Brothers and the Christian Brothers in the U.S. If one views this through the lens of a post-modern perspective the ambiguity is not necessarily one that we should be worried about.

A vowed person

There is an area however that we should not be ambiguous about in our vocation as Brother and it is linked to our identity as a religious. And ultimately that identity is in how we live our vows of poverty celibacy and obedience. Bro. Giallanza has these words to offer: "Brothers must live in such a way that they can make the Pauline recommendation 'Be imitators of me as I am of Christ' (1 Cor. 11:1) with confidence and integrity. If we believe that our God is incarnational then the example of our own lives must be the first of all our responses to the simple question 'What is a Brother?' Again we must ask ourselves about our willingness and ability to make that response."⁵

Conclusion

My contention is that on the one hand the ambiguity disappears when we are located in the space where Jesus' act of redemption continues to unfold. On the other hand our identity becomes crystal clear when we are able to appropriate the call of Jesus to follow him while witnessing to the Good News to the poor the memory of our ancestors (including the founder of our congregation and its early members) the charism of the congregation as contextualized or inculturated in our own time and space.

As has been shown in the life of Bro. Mauthe the crisis of identity becomes the least of a Brother's concern when living a joyful and meaningful life in the company of the poor who are able to glimpse the coming of God's reign in their lives.

As I end my talk I return to Kulaman. Fr. Raffy Tianero OMI after doing his anthropological studies at Ateneo de Manila wrote a thesis on the Dulangan Manobos' central core value of the *egfikadaet fedu*. It literally means losing one's heart when confronted with a very tragic or sad event as in the death of a dearly beloved. As one loses his heart he cannot breathe and it is only through *milantek fedu* or the return of the heart that one can breathe again.

Appropriating this rich cultural value of our indigenous people we Brothers can easily experience the *egfikadaet fedu* when confronted with the pain poverty human suffering and oppression of the least

of our brothers and sisters. However every time we are grounded in the Gospel and our identity as brothers it is inevitable that we experience the *milantek fedu* as we radically respond to be in communion with the poor the sick the weak and the lowly.

That way once again we can find our hearts that God lost and discover God's breath in us.

Notes

¹ Joel Giallanza CSC. *Come Closer.. I am Your Brother: Being and Doing Brotherhood. Review for Religious* 585 (September-October 1999) p. 485.

² Ibid. p. 485-6.

³ David Verthman CSsR. *Brothers in Clerical Institutes: A Hidden Gift.* in Michael F. Meister FSC. ed. *Blessed Ambiguity: Brothers in the Church.* Landover Maryland Christian Brothers Publications 1993 p. 86.

⁴ Armin Lustro FSC. "The Religious Brothers Vocation as a Parable of Renewal for the Philippine Church" *Religious Life for Asia* 13 (July-September 1999). p. 27-28

⁵ Giallanza op. cit. p. 487.

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