Landas 30:1 (2016) 43–49

TESTIMONY OF THE FAITHFUL ON PRIESTHOOD*

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This testimony (for which fifteen minutes were assigned in this afternoon's program) is expected to be a sharing of personal experience, *priestly experience*, and, after much "searching," I thought I could best do this by speaking about three priests, all connected with the Loyola School of Theology, and "giving witness" to their priesthood and priestly lives.

Sixty years ago, I was told that I was expected not only to teach theology at San Jose Seminary but eventually to "bring to separate existence" and to lead what is now the Loyola School of Theology. Fr. Juan Oñate, who was head of a Spanish mission in China before the Communist takeover, and who was sent out of China in 1949, "landed" first in Manila, and later served as one of Fr. Pedro Arrupe's assistants at the Jesuit Curia—it was he who arranged in 1966 for a brief audience for me with Papa Montini, Pope Paul VI. During the brief audience, the Holy Father, looking steadily into my eyes (as was his wont), said, simply and quietly, but with a sense of authority:

> For you, Father, you should receive the task given you—that of helping in the teaching and forming of priests—as given you by the Lord

*Delivered on the first day of the LST International Theological Symposium (Henry Lee Irwin Theater, Ateneo de Manila University: March 10, 2016).

> himself, not just an assignment from obedience. So, personally, hear from me, that it is the greatest and most important mission the Lord could have given *you*, and it should be *for you* a mandate for the fullest dedication of your life, your gifts, your labors. Receive this also as a mandate from the Holy Father.

I was 41 years of age then, and I must confess that I was deeply moved by those ten minutes or so with him, and by what he said to me. It was a unique experience that, in a real way, defined my life and the realization of my vocation. As a matter or fact, from then till my 85th year of life, it was, in our catalogues, my single lifetime assignment for forty-four years.

That said by way of foreword, let me, in the brief time I have, "give witness" to three priests.

First, on the priest formally called the "founder of LST," Fr. Horacio de la Costa [HLC], the first Filipino Jesuit Provincial (from 1964 to 1971) in our history as a Jesuit province, and the first Filipino Provincial in the history of the Church in the Philippines. Our university is at present presenting a ten-lecture series on him, celebrating his birth one hundred years ago.

Let me cite a paragraph from a book written by Fr. Clement McNaspy, then a well-known Jesuit writer in the U.S., who served a few years with HLC at the Jesuit Curia in Rome. These lines are about his first extended meeting with HLC, in Hongkong in 1968, at a Jesuit Missions U.S.A. conference on "The Future of Mission in Asia." Of that workshop, McNaspy wrote:

> Some participants were almost legendary, especially Horacio de la Costa, a Filipino Jesuit, [who] had written the authoritative history of the [Jesuit] Society in the Philippines and was later to become Assistant to Father Arrupe for East Asia, a man of the rarest brilliance combined with charm and accessibility. Indeed, when he died of cancer, unexpectedly, before the General Congregation that elected Father Kolvenbach as superior general, many of us had hoped Horacio would be the first non-European superior general.

Quite simply, from his earliest years at the Ateneo, HLC was regarded by all who had heard of him as a genius. He graduated from

the Ateneo de Manila University's humanities course in 1935, *summa cum laude*, at not yet 19 years of age. His unique gifts of mind and character, his talent as a writer and speaker, had then already become "nationally known." So great was his reputation for brilliance that the President of the country, Manuel Luis Quezon, together with a good number of other national leaders from government and professional life who were part of the SRO audience at the State University's auditorium, spent several hours at what was called "the grand act" of his presentation and defense of scholastic philosophy. "His future had no ceiling" when he graduated; he was expected in time to be the prime leader of our land. But he believed, and a young priest/spiritual guide with him, that the Lord was calling him to service in the Church for his people. To the surprise of most, he accepted this with an unexpected firmness, giving up that "future without a ceiling" for the Jesuit priesthood.

In the Jesuit Order, at that crucial time of the end of colonialism especially in Asia, he was given—one after the other—tasks of governance and its bureaucratic labors—all the way to Rome. This prevented him from the research and writing of history which he most wanted to do. This called for the complete self-sacrifice of what he really wanted to do in his life, to obediently accept what the Order asked of him.

The founding of LST, his dedicated, hands-on involvement in our earliest years here (I know because I was asked to be founding Dean and President then), were the *fruits of that continuing sacrifice he made to his Jesuit priesthood*. I became close enough a friend in later years to know what all this cost him and his own personal plans and desires. This side of him and his self-gift has never been brought up. Today, on this rather unusual event, in tribute and affection I do bring it up, to give it, and him, recognition and honor which I think he has never been explicitly given.

Secondly, a witness to the person and priestly ministry of Fr. Eduardo Pardo Hontiveros, all his priestly life a teacher and academic dean at LST, and for some years spiritual mentor and rector at San Jose Seminary. He was also a man of so many gifts, and the consequent variety of tasks he was involved in was somewhat

surprising. But, first of all, he was a pioneering musician in worship music and hymns; sometime in his latter years, he himself said he had written over 500 songs. He trained choirs; he led concerts abroad, featuring quite a bit of his own music, in Asia, in the U.S.A, in several countries in Europe. He received an honorary Ph.D. as the "father of Philippine liturgical music," and the Ateneo de Manila University's "Tanglaw ng Lahi" medal not only for writing the songs, but for the fact that those songs literally "encircled the globe" wherever Filipinos were present—even in Communist China, even at St. Peter's in Rome.

But from 1958 to 1991, he taught theology mainly at San Jose, at LST, at St. John Vianney in Cagayan de Oro, and in other seminaries. Some admirers have said, with some measure of truth, that "writing his songs and leading choirs to sing them was a teaching of theology also, perhaps in a more effective, more far-reaching way." When Cardinal Sin held a survey in the year 2000 to celebrate "the most outstanding Catholic writers in the Philippines in the 20th Century," to everyone's great surprise, Fr. Honti came out second in the voting, after Fr. de la Costa.

Fr. Honti's life was so full of "every sort of doing," but in 1991, while on a teaching stint at Vianney Theological Seminary, Cagayan de Oro City, he suffered a stroke which, after an initial promising recovery, ended up by really ending his "active life"—destroying almost totally his capacity for speech, his capacity to function in any of the activities he was involved in. Eighteen years of almost total silence followed. Eighteen years of enforced silence, for a man who really loved to be with people, to converse and socialize; one who loved—greatly loved—to sing, and with others above all; one who seemed to be always laughing with friends, the hundreds of friends who so readily loved him. At his funeral Mass, I said, to applause and tears, that this man was one who "never never had an enemy in all his life."

Among others, Fr. Pedro de Achutegui used to repeat that remark that if our Catholic doctrine held that only Mary the Mother of the Lord was conceived free from original sin, some pious Tradition said that John the Baptist was born without original sin (vid. the Visitation

account and the unborn baby rejoicing in Elizabeth's womb), and St. Joseph the foster-father of Jesus, too, we could probably add Eddie Hontiveros to the little list—so innocent and so filled with happy goodness did he seem to all.

For those eighteen years of "imprisoned silence," Fr. Honti lived in the room beside mine. In all those years no one—almost never—saw him sad or depressed or unsmiling. In public, with others, yes, somehow he kept up almost unfailingly that "way of proceeding." But there was another side to his life. I saw him often alone in his room, lonely and in suffering, in visibly deep suffering, sometimes quietly weeping, his rosary in his fingers, or his face in his hands. Or in the infirmary chapel, when it was empty, in some quiet corner, his head bent—sometimes for hours, in inner pain, all alone.

I know that his obedient love was the one assignment the Lord and the Jesuit Order gave him for all his priestly life, and when its faithful fulfillment became mostly his silence and his suffering, he offered these as his priestly ministry, and for the priesthood we served here at LST. Many of us who were colleagues and contemporaries think that if perhaps any of our LST faculty were saints, Honti was surely the first of them.

The third priest and last I will give witness to was an early LST student who came from the Maryknoll Sisters' St. James Academy in nearby Malabon, an Oblate of Mary Immaculate, ordained priest in December 1967, graduate of our LST class of 1968. He was not a priest in the academe but a shepherd, one of those Pope Francis speaks about as bearing the smell of his sheep—"faithful to the one who appointed him," the Letter to the Hebrews says (Heb. 3:2), "and compassionate with his flock." The Second Pastoral Council of the Philippines (PCP II) stressed that being "close to his people" is at the heart of our priestly service.

It is Bishop Ben de Jesus, made Vicar Apostolic of Jolo in 1991, ordained bishop in 1992, who we have in our sights.

"No one of his flock was unimportant to him"—this was said of him by everyone who knew him: the *manangs*, the *estambays*, the sick, and

especially the poor. "*Pauperes evangelizantur*" was the OMI motto from the start, even before Latin America gave us the "preferential option for the poor." Fr. Ben perhaps did not use the formula, but somehow from the start simply practiced it. And long before "interreligious dialogue" became a buzzword, the Oblates have been working at it in Mindanao, and Archbishop Capalla remarked that it had become part of Bishop Ben's person, practiced mostly by friendship and unfailing kindness. This was joined with a practical, feet-on-the ground wisdom, openness, and patience. And people began to sense a heart open to much loving not so much by words, but mostly by compassion, by deeds. Even his Malabon family saw that for Bishop Ben, Muslims had become part of his flock; some of them he sent to Pateros to learn how to make *balut* for a living. They told me that "*Lolo pari*" was forever looking for ways to help Muslims get better schooling, improved livelihood, higher incomes, and fuller human living.

Early on in his ministry, we are told, the children began to gather around Fr. Ben whenever he was near. They seemed to know that his heart was with them. He would stop for them when they came; he always had some friendly time with them, watching their games, joining them in chatter and laughter. At his funeral Mass, tears flowed unashamedly when the kids sang with their high voices the *baleleng* song which *Padil Bin* would often stop and sing along with them as they walked together down the streets.

I do not know how exactly we had become quite friendly; in later years, he always seemed genuinely glad to meet me. Once, already a bishop, he brought me home, in the car which picked him up from the airport. I do not forget that ride, because with his usual soft-spoken simplicity, he told me much about his own life, and opened his priestly heart and its love—a passionate love, really—for the Lord and His people. After his death, I heard much about his prayer, e.g., when staying nights at the CBCP, the sisters who sometimes retired quite late due to work would find him in the chapel long after midnight, kneeling before the tabernacle, sometimes with arms outstretched in prayer. An Italian Salesian priest who worked at the Nunciature told me he had several times spoken with him and was always struck by

his unmistakable peace. "As with Mother Teresa, one sensed a deep peace in the presence of God that comes with an unceasing prayer. With him, as with Mother Teresa, one knew it was truly there."

One morning, on February 4, 1997, as he stood in front of the Jolo cathedral, a car drove up and he was shot many times for a brutal and bloody death. Up until now, it seems it has never really been known why he was killed, so senselessly and brutally killed. His funeral showed how greatly loved he was by his own flock, and by Muslims who had experienced or heard of the unfailing goodness and generosity of heart of *Padil Bin*.

In a talk he gave at the Golden Jubilee celebrations of OMI presence in Jolo, Bishop Ben said, "I am an ordinary human being, weak, vulnerable, but God used me to proclaim his love and compassion to others." But that weakness and vulnerability finally gave to the Lord the total gift of life.

For sure LST cannot take much credit for the priestly spirit, zeal, and holiness of Bishop Ben, or for the glory of the sacrifice of his life. But we can hope that the hours which he spent over the years in the classrooms and halls of LST, listening to its teachers, contributed to the wonder and beauty of the priestly life he lived—contributed to the "faithfulness to Christ Jesus and compassion for his people" which the Word says must mark the priest, and that from heaven he continues to pray for us and our labors. And that maybe, just maybe, he does not mind that today we rejoice, with humble pride, to have his name listed as "graduate of LST."