



Adventures in Mission: Celebrating the Gift of Caring Presence

ABSTRACT

This article gives the reader a profound glimpse of a zealous Redemptorist missionary. His personal accounts in doing missions in Cebu and Negros in the past 20 years highlight the essential gift that one can ever give to someone: the gift of caring presence. In an engaging writing style with a tinge of humor, he narrates how he strives to: a) accompany the believer in his/her journey of faith, and b) to strengthen the bonds within the community. Also, he provides several anecdotes about the people (e.g., the homeless, the sick, troubled family, the learned church-goer) he had encountered, who somehow challenged – and likewise affirmed – the missionary task he embraced as a missionary priest. Following an “experiential framework,” the author beautifully weaves his experiences, the scriptures, and popular religious practices in a coherent narrative that will inspire anyone who sees the value of the vocation of a missionary today.

Keywords: Redemptorist missionary, house visitation, personal encounter, faith gathering



INTRODUCTION

After 20 years of conducting Redemptorist-style missions in both urban (Cebu) and rural settings (Negros Oriental), I offer the following reflections. These reflections are discursive and descriptive rather than analytical. I offer various scenarios and, hopefully, some food for thought. Whatever I may have to offer over the years, I consider that I have gained far more, mostly in meeting people, often in quite dire straits, who were able to maintain a certain dignity and grace, and who keep a will-to-live almost in defiance of their circumstances. Among the muddy paths of the hills of Negros or the garbage-strewn alleys of Cebu squatter areas, let me assure you that there are people of truly noble humanity. What follows is an outline of my goals and methods, descriptions (narrative) of certain situations and events, interspersed with personal testimonies, and some learnings I garnered through the various experiences. This article has three headings: 1) Visitation, 2) Scripture, and 3) Popular Devotions and Celebrations.

For those seeking some detailed statement of Vision-Mission or rigorous methodology, my approach will seem simple, even verging on the simplistic. This eschewing of a more detailed “scaffolding” for my ministry may be partly a matter of personal temperament, but is also due to the fact that for most of the time I was on the missions alone, with just the occasional visits, for a week or two, from our postulants in Dumaguete, and part-time lay cooperators in Cebu. My companions were my guides (usually lay ministers, catechists, others active in the life of the Christian community), and they often played a significant role in the atmosphere that was created and the celebrating of the various events.

After meeting the parish priest and various parish groups in a preparatory phase, an area would be chosen where I would begin. And from there, I would move from one village (*barangay*) to the next. My goals were twofold: 1) to accompany the believer on his/her “daily walk with the Lord”, and 2) to strengthen the bonds within the community. To achieve or at least strive for these goals,

my approach consists of the essence of simplicity: meet people in their homes and organize various gatherings, to celebrate and fortify our faith.

VISITATION

Visiting people in their homes, as part of a mission, has an ancient pedigree, long before Jesus sent out the apostles or the seventy-two. Ezekiel had said that Yhwh himself would shepherd his flock, because of the lack of commitment on the part of the appointed community leaders (Ez. 34:11-16). Jesus said that he knows the sheep by name, they hear his voice and listen to him (Jn. 10:2-4). All this presumes a certain closeness or intimacy, or at least a familiarity with the flock. And when the flock is scattered over the hillsides of a Negro village or packed into the higgledy-piggledy jumble of a city squatter area, what's required is house to house visitation. I give some examples:

I visited a house, but more like a "hovel of unhappiness". Those quotation marks are not an exaggeration, but any unhappiness in the place was my interpretation, not the family's testimony. This was misery incarnated, although, as I say, any discontent was my own perception. From my brief visit, the family seemed to be "coping" mightily. The parents were in their mid-50s. The father was extremely taciturn, and I was correct in my private prediction that I wouldn't be seeing him later that evening at our gathering. But the mother was more effusive: she had lost three of her children when they were still infants, and (if I understood correctly), a married child of hers had fallen down a step soon after giving birth, which caused the tragic death of both mother and child. The mother also had a son, about 20, who was lying behind a curtain; he was severely handicapped, physically and mentally.

Another married daughter who was in the house said that she wouldn't be able to attend the gathering later as she had an aching foot. That evening we gathered at 7 p.m., and, as usual, outside the house (due to the crowd), we projected the songs onto the wall of the house, using a bed-sheet as a screen. Our gospel that

night was the Lord's healing of the paralytic lowered down through the roof (Lk. 5:18-26). A few shared, then I gave my "few words". In the course of my sharing, I mentioned that this gospel's healing was somehow miraculous, but what about those who look after the long-term sick or terminally ill? I asked (aloud, because I couldn't see clearly in the dark) if the mother (of my earlier visit) was present. She was; I spoke directly to her. I said that the (long-term) care of the sick is a Christ-like action, citing Matthew 25:36: "I was sick and you looked after me." In the obscurity, I'm almost sure I saw some kind of recognition in the mother's face. At least, I hope I did. The Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote: "this seeing the sick endears them to us, us too it endears" ("*Felix Randal*")¹. I often find the anointing of the sick to be a very moving occasion: it's a time when those concerned (the sick person, the family, etc.) are truly present, where their hopes and fears are tightly concentrated in this simple, poignant sacrament.

That particular house was dreadfully inadequate (yet they were coping), and something of an exception in the hills of Jimalalud, (Negros Oriental); there is not really any serious poverty or widespread indigence – mind you, there is nothing that you would call "wealth" or "magnificence" either. They manage, through hard work and good fortune, to make ends meet and enjoy the occasional luxury.

But in the cities, pockets of squalor are not difficult to find. I was exposed to them during the missions in Cebu & Mandaue: people living on next-to-nothing, trying to make do with a squalor-space wherein you couldn't swing a kitten, let alone a cat. I think it's this experience of such lack, this (even passing) acquaintance with such deprivation and need that gives me a horror of waste. When I see food wasted, when I see money being spent recklessly, when I see animals being treated better than humans, my reaction is almost visceral.

¹W. H. Gardner, ed., *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poems and Prose* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1963), 47.

Enclaves of destitution are not far from any of our monasteries, but you can't see them from the common room, and it's not sufficient either just to alight from the sweet-scented *Adventure* at the chapel door to celebrate Mass in the *barrio*². One must be willing to muddy one's patent leather shoes or dirty one's *Nike* or *Crocs*, walk along the pathway and cross the threshold and touch and sense, even fleetingly, the abasement.

*Here is your footstool and there rest your feet where live
the poorest, and lowliest, and lost.*

*When I try to bow to you, my obeisance cannot
reach down to the depth where your feet rest among the
poorest, lowliest, and lost.*

*Pride can never approach to where you walk
in the clothes of the humble among the poorest, and
lowliest, and lost.*

*My heart can never find its way to where
you keep company with the companionless among the
poorest, the lowliest, and the lost.*³

2013 was the bi-centenary of Blessed Frederic Ozanam, the founder of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, whose members are resolved to giving personal service “to God in the persons of the poor, whom they are to visit at their own dwellings and assist by every means in their power”. He said “ten times a day a sister will visit the poor, ten times a day she will find God there” and “knowledge of the poor is not to be obtained from books or studies, but by visiting him in his upstairs garret (attic) in coldness”.

With my guides, we visit one house after another, in the hills scattered, in the lowland villages in rows and clusters. Well, there were times when, for days on end, the rain fell as in the time of Noah. I was sorely tempted to stay indoors and read my book or say my prayers. But always, without fail, my guides would turn up at the appointed time (8 a.m.), complete with umbrella, oilskin,

²Also referred to as *Barangay*, *Barrio* is a native Filipino term for village.

³Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali*, trans. Rabindranath Tagore (London: Macmillan & Co., 1913), no. 10.

plastic cape or, if the rain was light, banana leaf! And we'd set off, wading through the ankle-deep water if along the road, squelching through the mud if crossing the narrow pathways through the rice fields.

Well, I'm full of admiration for these people: their dedication, their no-nonsense down-to-business approach, bunching up their skirts or rolling up their trousers knee-high to cross the streams; their sense of being on a mission as we go from house to house, talking with parents or families. We chat for a while, pray a little, practice the new mission songs and invite all to a gathering later in the evening in a neighbor's house. That's why I put such a high premium on the visits because, from experience, I suspect that most of those we visit, especially the men, will put in no appearance at the various mission activities.

And then sometimes, whether ironically, paradoxically or just plain sadly, on my house-to-house visits, I meet the homeless. Ruben was one such. Here's an account of his last few days on earth. I first met Ruben a week before he died. He was 43 years of age, single. His "house" (not an entirely satisfactory word) was on the edge of a middle-class housing estate. He was crouched outside his hut, obviously unwell. His skin and eyes were yellow. He had stopped working on a building site and had had a check-up at the public hospital, but the jargon-filled doctor's report was impossible to decipher.

One of my lay companions brought Ruben to see a doctor close to the Redemptorists at our parish clinic. She read his medical reports, examined him and correctly diagnosed that he wasn't long for this world. I went to see the Missionaries of Charity at their house for the dying in Cebu, called "Gift of Love" ("*Gasa sa Gugma*"). Because Ruben had living relatives, there were some minimal requirements to be fulfilled but the nuns were willing to accept him, and agreed to come to the mission area within the next few days to see Ruben and bring him to more comfortable and comforting surroundings.

On Wednesday, I went to the village hall and collected the certificate of indigence and prepared the social worker's recommendation (two of the nuns' requirements). The requirement which was proving difficult was the locating of Ruben's brother and sister, so that one of them could sign a waiver in the case of his death – thus freeing the nuns from any legal complications afterwards. From what I picked up from the few locals who knew him, Ruben wasn't the easiest to get on with, so there was minimal contact between the three siblings. Eventually his sister, Alicia turned up and we made text contact with his brother Danilo, the latter promising to be present on Friday morning when the nuns were due to arrive.

This was the time of a typhoon; all day Tuesday and Wednesday Ruben sat against the outer wall of the local newly-built chapel of the housing association. He said he was drier there than in his many-holed hut. We bought him some prescribed pain relievers, for all the slight comfort there were to give him. On Thursday evening he was in severe discomfort and was still sitting, leaning against the wall of the locked chapel. The chapel was entirely financed by one of the local families, the husband working abroad as a high-ranking officer on board ship.

Alicia requested that Ruben be allowed inside the chapel to rest more comfortably and securely. Her request was denied; in fact the owners wanted Ruben to move to the local gymnasium, but apart from what seems such callous indifference, it was out of the question for him to make his way there, the path being flooded, etc.

It's difficult to imagine a more pitiful sight than dying Ruben slumped outside the chapel. I passed that way at 9 p.m. coming from a bible-sharing. I suggested it would be proper to let him sleep in the chapel. No sleeping mat could be found for Ruben's final hours, just some cardboard, not even a blanket. Alicia, my mission companions and I tried to help Ruben to lie down. I whispered "*pahulay*, Ruben" (rest), assuring him of the nuns' arrival in the morning.

He never saw the sun rise again. When I passed that way at 8 a.m. next morning Ruben was half-covered with a sheet, a candle burning near his head. His face was uncovered.

Neither Alicia nor Danilo appeared at the chapel on Friday morning. I met Danilo that night, expressed my condolences and wondered why he had not come to the chapel on hearing of the death of his brother. He said, “What was the point, now that Ruben is dead?” which, though possessing a certain logic, is also somewhat lacking in feeling.

If you, gentle reader, discern a tone of judgment in these notes, then you discern entirely perspicaciously. Hopefully you or I would have acted differently in the same circumstances – or would we? The point is that we can recognize and identify attitudes and behavior lacking in some fairly basic human qualities.

Because no relative was present on that morning, and none of the locals was showing much initiative beyond contacting the funeral home, the two lay workers and I spent much of that day arranging things for Ruben’s funeral, going from one office to another (social welfare, funeral home, city councilor’s office) – we arranged for Ruben to have a “pauper’s burial”.

Ruben was buried on the following Monday. RIP.

SCRIPTURE

The most common of the mission activities is the nightly prayer gathering, either in a house (usually) or in a chapel (rarely). Once again, this activity aims at focusing on the twin goals of: 1) helping the believer in the “daily walk with the Lord”, and 2) strengthening the group identity and purpose. It is actually a nice combination of the light-hearted and the solemn. The amusement comes during the 20-30 minute song practice at the beginning, which I consider an integral part of the entire prayer meeting. You see, I give scores for the various singing performances, jokingly of course, and it’s all taken in good spirit and it actually helps create a relaxed atmosphere, as well as achieving the eminently practical result of the people learning new songs. The point then comes

when we “formally” begin the session with an opening song, followed by one decade of the rosary, then an “Alleluia” to prepare for the gospel (or Pauline epistle, occasionally). After the reading and a short period of silence, people are free to share. Then I offer my own input.

For the Sacred Scriptures contain the word of God and since they are inspired really are the word of God; and so the study of the sacred page is, as it were, the soul of sacred theology. By the same word of Scripture the ministry of the word also, that is, pastoral preaching, catechetics and all Christian instruction, in which the liturgical homily must hold the foremost place, is nourished in a healthy way and flourishes in a holy way.⁴

I mentioned above that one of the gospel passages to which I often return is the Lucan episode of the healing of the paralytic lowered through the roof. Among the points I offer for consideration is the whole notion of misfortune or tragedy being “God’s will”, and this nearly always generates a good discussion, with not infrequent comments of how my words somehow occasioned a “release” for a person’s thinking or outlook. What before (tragedy, misfortune) had seemed to be simply “God’s will” was now open to re-evaluation. Still, I have to say that there is quite a gap between what may be called the more “intellectual” and the more “common” approach to God’s word. The following is an example from a mountain village, shortly after an earthquake had left the people somewhat traumatized.

I returned to the place a few days after the quake, having gone to Dumaguete the day before it happened. I stayed that Saturday night in the *barrio*. The man of the house and I had a candlelight dinner, even though Valentine’s Day was still the following week (the electric power had been damaged due to the

⁴Vatican Council II, *Dei Verbum, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* (18 November 1965), n. 24, in *Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. A. Flannery (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1980).

‘quake); the rest of the family felt more at ease under their tarpaulins in the school grounds. The big talking-point the next morning was the two tremors during the night, of which I was completely oblivious.

During the Sunday Eucharist, I summoned up all the theological arguments I knew and tapped into all my resources of personal charm (!) to try and impress upon my still-shaken hearers the vital distinction between primary and secondary causality – that God is not directly “answerable” or “responsible” for every single happening in our daily lives: tricky enough to elucidate in English for a theologically-literate audience, a near-impossibility in Cebuano for a group of farmers more fluent regarding rice and sugarcane prices than the subtleties of scholastic thought. In the end, whether or not they understood what I was saying became a moot point. When I finished preaching I asked the local lay minister if he had a “few words” to share and he went straight for the jugular of the argument, quoting from memory the book of Revelations 16:18, the mother-of-all earthquakes as the indisputable evidence both of God’s wrath against sinners and The Second Coming! “Then there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder and a severe earthquake. No earthquake like it has ever occurred since humankind has been on earth, so tremendous was the quake”.

Still, I have encountered some surprises when it comes to the scriptures. Here’s an example from our church in Dumaguete. It was 6 a.m. and I was making the daily crossing between the gentle, entertaining reveries of the land of Orpheus (i.e., sleep) and the more serious responsibility of our quotidian Alphonsian existence (i.e., giving a homily). The first reading was from the Second Book of Kings, describing the exile to Babylon. In my short talk I was holding forth, with appropriate solemnity, on the cruelties imposed on the unfortunate Israelite king. As I described how his children were slaughtered as he was forced to watch, and then how he had his eyes gouged out, I saw a churchgoer move his head from side to side. Generally (apart from India) this means one of two things: either he was nodding in sad sympathy at the dire

straits of the hapless monarch, or else he was signaling that I was wrong in what I was sharing.

As soon as I reached my room I opened the Old Testament: he was right and I was wrong! I had mixed up Zedekiah (who indeed did suffer such cruelties) with Jehoiakim (who, taken into captivity, was treated pretty well, all things considered). Was I disappointed at being so caught out, “corrected”? Not at all; his simple nodding gesture was like a little pin near the big balloon of any pretensions I may have, any presumptions of infallibility that are apt to tempt me. In fact, far from any negative sensation at all, I was thrilled to discover a layperson so informed about the scriptures, and especially so familiar with the more obscure passages. In the mission villages in the province, whether mountain or highway, the scriptures, both Old and New testaments, are almost as foreign as the Koran. I mention Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, (not to mention Peter, James and John), and they are as familiar to the Catholics of Dumaguete diocese as the reigning monarchs of Siberia, Kazakhstan and Uruguay. So for a churchgoer, at 6:15 a.m., to nod his accurate awareness of my Old Testament regal mix-up was altogether good news for me.

I have to record one incident regarding our evening prayer gathering: one *sitio*⁵ in a rather remote *barrio* is still without electricity; there are 18 Catholic families there scattered around the hills. We gathered as usual at 6.30 p.m. (intending to get under way by 7 p.m.), and there was fog as thick as pea-soup. So there we were with our Manila-paper hymns hanging on a peg and our rechargeable flashlights straining against the surrounding, enveloping darkness. The situation was looking dull: hard to penetrate the engulfing gloom, hard to generate some kind of tune. Then, Lo and Behold! A voice from the outer darkness: “We have arrived!” Well, it was reminiscent of the gospel cry “The bridegroom is here”! It was the moment to re-think our reality:

⁵*Sitio* is a native Filipino term describing rural territorial enclaves that is most often away from the *Barangay* center.

not darkness-engulfed, but surprise-awaiting. The voice was a group of 15 people from another part of the *barrio*, at least 45 minutes' walk over hills and dales, in pitch-black darkness, in the dead of night. One of the men had a *petromax* (hurricane lamp), a most welcome addition to our gloomy assembly. It saturated the encroaching darkness with a luminosity that enlightened our hearts and our gathering for the next two hours. Then around 9 p.m. the 15 "prayer warriors" set off again to return to their homes. As I walked to the house where I was sleeping (10 minutes away), I could see the glow of the *petromax* as the group wound its way over the hills: "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness could not overcome it" (Jn. 1:5).

POPULAR DEVOTIONS & CELEBRATIONS

Another series of activities which help in realizing the twin mission goals of both self- and community-strengthening has to do with what is often called "popular religiosity" or "devotions". This includes such staples of the Catholic tradition as "The Way of the Cross", the weekly novena to Our Mother of Perpetual Help, and the seasonal activities of Lent, Holy week, Eastertide, Advent and Christmas. I have also adapted these traditions, composing "The Way of the Birth" (for Advent) and "The Way of the Light" (for Eastertide). I offer some examples:

One sure way of involving the men, although that motive is only a minor part of the event, is to organize a procession. The menfolk will be encouraged, cajoled or blackmailed to attend by the women in their lives – mother, wife or girlfriend – and woe is he who does not respond to such feminine inducements!

Something is carried shoulder-high along the pathways: if it's Lent, then a cross is carried; if it's Advent, then it's a crib. The latter is patterned on the Lenten Way of the Cross. This one, celebrating the events surrounding the Lord's birth, I call "The Way of the Crib" (or "Birth" – "*Ang Dalan sa Pagkatawo*"), and that's what carried shoulder-high. We pause at various stations

and listen to a reading commemorating this wonderful time: the Annunciation, Mary's response, her Visitation to Elizabeth, etc., The only troubling reading is Herod's murderous plan, then we're back with the Birth, the Angels, the Shepherds, etc. It's a procession of joy. After winding along the village paths in the cool of the evening, with Christmas lights blinking on the "stretcher" carrying the crib and people carrying candles and singing "Silent Night" and "O Holy Night" and other seasonal Cebuano songs, we finally arrive at the chapel, and enjoy bowls of sweet rice cooked in cauldrons.

Another procession I compiled is "The Way of Light" and it's used during the Easter season. The paschal candle is carried shoulder-high and we pause at various stations, which commemorate the growth, trials and success of the early Christians: the resurrection, ascension, Holy Spirit, conversion of Saul to Paul, the courage of the erstwhile cowardly apostles, etc. We begin at dusk and it's a lovely sight to see the procession winding its way along the edges of the rice fields and corn fields. We sing as we process, and if the next altar is still distant, then one of the women leads us in a decade of the rosary. What a comforting sight to see the mighty paschal candle held aloft, not succumbing to the encircling darkness!

I like to look at the faces as we stop at the stations during our various activities. As the procession winds its way along the paths and among the rocks of a given village in the hills of Negros, I see faces lined with effort, struggle, suffering and perseverance. I know a lot of the individual stories from listening to the people, both during my visits to their homes and when they share at the prayer meeting. Some of the men look self-conscious. I suppose the prospect of being seen carrying the cross or even joining in the procession conjures in their minds the possibility of comments later, especially from our "separated brethren". There are tales in some places about the childish antics of some of the smaller born-again groups, jeering as the Catholic *Aurora* (dawn procession)

passes by, and so some in our processions may feel that they're in the evangelical crosshairs. But the women are stronger, more resolute.

FINAL REMARKS

Divine mercy is one of the hallmarks of our congregation (our motto is: "With the Lord is plentiful redemption", a quote from Psalm 130:7). One of the nicest evenings I have on the mission is a celebration of forgiveness. It's a simple ceremony. I begin by emphasizing that the core, over-riding message of our gathering is God's mercy, which is offered freely. God's grace, however, may be free but it is not cheap. Christ highlighted the incongruity and unacceptability of asking for God's mercy while denying that same mercy to our own enemies. Nonetheless, God's overflowing, inexhaustible forgiveness is the focus of our evening's ceremony.

I try to highlight the social nature of sin, how it affects others. In fact, as Aquinas wrote: "God is not offended by us except through that by which we act against our good".⁶ I use visual aids to make my points graphic: I wield a machete to highlight the various types of violence which scar, maim or kill – physically, verbally or emotionally. I display a plastic bag of sugar (*shabu* substitute) to focus on the prevalence of drug abuse and the damage and destruction caused by it. I place a cloth over someone's eyes as a sign of "sins of omission", how we shut out eyes to situations which cry out for comment or condemnation. Then time is given for each to reflect on what they need to change in their lives. I encourage them to try and identify one habit or weakness that could be the focus of both their penitence and renewal.

The actual meeting of penitent and minister is based on an article I read years ago in *Chicago Studies* magazine. Simply said, sorrow for sin and desire to reform are communicated in silence, through the clenching of both hands. The fists represent hardness

⁶Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles, book three: Providence, part II*, trans. Vernon J. Bourke (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), ch. 122.

and being closed: the fist is used to fight, the palm to caress; a closed fist cannot receive a gift, only an open hand can. The priest then opens the hands and says the words of absolution. From the priest, the forgiven one then proceeds to have oil smeared on their open palms. The oil is actually ordinary oil, blessed to be used as the balm of healing. Finally they proceed to kiss a crucifix, expressing their gratitude to the Lord for his goodness. The entire event is celebrated slowly and solemnly (apart from the machete wielding!), with nice background music, dimmed lighting, and good use of the *Bahandi!* And what, you may wonder, is the *Bahandi*?

The *Bahandi* is the mission book I've been using since the first edition in 1994. I make no claims to originality, I'm simply a compiler. It includes many songs, devotions (Way of the Cross, novena, etc.), short biographies of a dozen individuals (e.g., St. Oscar Romero, Bienvenido Tuedud [former bishop of Iligan], Dorothy Day, St. Maximilian Kolbe, Dr. Martin Luther King, etc.) and various prayers and blessings. The following is an example of how the book can be used when the mission is over.

“*Padre*, I anointed a dying neighbor”. The speaker was a pious housewife from a former mission area in Cebu city. I was intrigued and asked for more details. She had gone to her own parish as well as a neighboring one to request for a priest to anoint the dying neighbor, but nobody was available. So taking with her the mission book, *Ang Bag-ong Bahandi* (“treasure”), she went to minister to the sick. She read all the prayers and intercessions under “Blessing of the Sick”, and then she did the “anointing”! It’s a simple but moving part of the ceremony wherein all present make the sign of the cross on the forehead of the patient. I always find it emotional, whether in private hospitals with the well-to-do or in the simpler homes of the rustics in the hills of Negros and Cebu. The accompanying prayer says that, as an infant the sick person was marked with the sign of the cross at baptism, now we make the same sign invoking God’s help in the time of sickness. I find it a lovely display of communal empathy and support, living compassion.

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