

## **TO LAY DOWN ONE'S LIFE FOR ONE'S FRIEND: A MODEL OF MISSION IN JOHN 15:13 IN THE CONTEXT OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE'S APOSTOLATE**

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### **Introduction**

The Religious of Notre Dame of the Missions is celebrating its 30<sup>th</sup> year of being in mission with the Dulangan Manobo people where I was privileged to spend eight years of my missionary life. The mission of the Religious of Notre Dame of the Missions with the tribe began with the invitation of the late Sultan Tagenek Dakias, a Manobo chieftain. He appealed to the Archdiocese of Cotabato, "help my people survive in today's world." He feared that his people might just disappear from the face of the earth due to the extreme poverty that was being experienced. During this time, the Dulangan Manobos have lost most of their ancestral land to settlers coming from different parts of the Philippines. They have been pushed to the most interior and remote areas of Kulaman. They have become a minority in their own territory. Lack of education and illiteracy made them vulnerable and susceptible to deception. Their survival is endangered as a people.

The response materialized in 1987, when the first two RNDM sisters arrived in Kulaman to begin our mission with the Dulangan Manobo people. It evolved into a center that has a three-fold component of education, health and culture-sensitive income initiatives. The Manobos have accepted the sisters into their territory to assist them in their struggle for survival and self-determination basically through social apostolate. The presence of the RNDM sisters in the life of the Dulangan Manobos is not in a traditional sense of evangelization through an attempt to convert them to Christianity, rather, the sisters desired to embody a dialogical stance through dialogue of life with them.

The Dulangan Manobo tribe is an indigenous tribe living in and around the Sultan Kudarat area. They are found in the municipalities of Lebak, Palembang, Kalamansig, Ezperanza and Kulaman (Sen. Ninoy Aquino).

The classification of being indigenous, according to the Philippine Constitutions, is rather different. Technically speaking, all of the tribes in the Philippines could be considered indigenous since they were original inhabitants of the land. However, the difference between those who are considered indigenous and non-indigenous is defined not between the original inhabitants of and the immigrants to the Philippine Archipelago but rather according to a point of history of our colonization. This is expressed in the definition of the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA):

Indigenous Cultural Communities/Indigenous Peoples — refer to a group of people or homogenous societies identified by self-ascription and ascription by others, who have continuously lived as organized community on communally bounded and defined territory, and who have, under claims of ownership since time immemorial, occupied, possessed and utilized such territories, sharing common bonds of language, customs, traditions and other distinctive cultural traits, or who have, through resistance to political, social and cultural inroads of colonization, nonindigenous religions and cultures, become historically differentiated from the majority of Filipinos. ICCs/IPs shall likewise include peoples who are regarded as indigenous on account of their descent from the populations which inhabited the country, at the time of conquest or colonization, or at the time of inroads of nonindigenous religions and cultures, or the establishment of present state boundaries, who retain some or all of their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions, but who may have been displaced from their traditional domains or who may have resettled outside their ancestral domains.

Approximately 60% of the classified indigenous communities of the Philippines along with the Moro and Christian Settlers reside in Mindanao where cultural and religious diversity is experienced much more than in the other islands. Our experience of Spanish colonization has divided the people of the Philippines. Utilizing the divide-and-conquer tactic, the colonizers pitted the other inhabitants of the Philippines, especially the ones in the north, in their battles against the Mindanao inhabitants, thereby, creating animosity among the people. The people who have displaced the indigenous populations in Mindanao were not people from other places or

outsiders but Filipinos from other parts of Philippines seeking for a better life. The influx caused the minoritization of the indigenous and the Moro populations. In Kulaman Valley, the coming of the settlers who were predominantly Catholics began in the 1950s when the government, with the intention of developing and “civilizing” Mindanao, offered homestead settlement areas.

Along with the coming of the settlers is the displacement of the Manobo people from their ancestral territories, consigning them to the far-flung and remote areas of the municipality.

Since they did not share the concept of land ownership with the settlers and did not know the legalities, they were not able to protect their land through acquisition of land titles.

This is the context of my appropriation of John 15:13 as a model of mission. It is my hope that new insights will be gained through our engagement with this passage. St. John’s Gospel is not known for its missiological ideas but definitely, the Gospel has missiological ideals which we could draw upon. This paper is not meant to be a hermeneutical and interpretative exercise but rather an appropriation of insights derived from John 15:13, which was the Gospel passage that has spoken to me so powerfully while living and working in Kulaman with the Dulangan Manobos for eight years. We will also draw wisdom from the traditional practices of the Dulangan Manobos as experienced in living among them.

### **Theological Insights of John’s Gospel on Friendship**

The passage belongs to the second part of the Gospel of St. John which is traditionally known as the “Book of Glory.” It is preceded by the narrative on the washing of the feet that some commentators regard as analogous to the Eucharistic institution found in the other Synoptic Accounts. Therefore, the accounts proceeding from this has in its very essence the imperative for communion or unity.

Friendship in the Gospel of St. John is a theme which feminist biblical interpretation develops because of its implication in the way the community of disciples is conceived as non-hierarchical. The relationship that Jesus is inviting us to enter into with others is characterized by love, equality and mutuality. Reflecting on friendship in John’s Gospel, O’Day says that there is always a connotation in the New Testament that a “friend” is “one who loves.” She says further that, “This fundamental connection between love and friendship is an essential starting point for reclaiming friendship as a resource for faith and ethics for contemporary Christians.”

In the washing of the feet and his laying down of his life, Jesus becomes the model of friendship. In other words, it is an imperative for one’s action towards others as disciples of Jesus.

The aforementioned idea on friendship is leaning towards a Christological understanding that we are to emulate. Hock, however, proposes another perspective, and that is, to look also at the “Beloved Disciple” mentioned in the Gospel in the light of the theme of friendship. He uses the convention of pairs as regarded in the Greco-Roman Friendship. The behavior of the Beloved Disciple towards Jesus is a response to his offer of a deeper relationship. Following the events in the Gospel where the Beloved Disciple was mentioned gives us also an overview of what friendship means in John’s Gospel. The Beloved Disciple reclined with Jesus in the most intimate way. One can only imagine his relationship with him through the events as recounted in the Gospel. He was entrusted with Mary and to receive her to his home as his mother at the foot of the cross. He ran to the tomb with hope and expectations and he was not disappointed. He saw and believed. He exemplified devotion, faithfulness, sharing in the mind of Jesus and acceptance of responsibility. The Beloved Disciple’s friendship with Jesus could be surmised as deep, intimate and committed.

Another way of conceiving friendship is presented by Robert. She is of the opinion that friendship, as taught by Jesus, leads to fellowship. She says that, for Jesus, it was not an “isolated incident of individual self-fulfillment, but the foundation of loving fellowship.”

Friendship, then, is a way to build a sense of community. It is not something that is enjoyed only by the pair but extends beyond them. In fact, it is an empowering relationship to extend oneself beyond the bounds of the relationship.

These three opinions about friendship lay the foundation of our encounters in our mission. First, we put on the mind of Jesus in his way of being in mission which is self-giving and self-sacrificing in service because he considers others as friends. Second, we need to be able to commit to our relationship with the other in the spirit of mutuality and trust. Personal relationship is necessary in order to nurture a relationship. Third, any committed relationship needs to extend beyond the personal relationship so that a fellowship is nurtured and a sense of community is felt. The personal relationship does not diminish but becomes an enriching part of the community. Its energy extending to be in the service of the community.

### **No Longer Servants...But Friends**

Three years ago, we invited a facilitator for our strategic planning. She shared that in her organization, they were re-thinking about their own strategies in working with the indigenous peoples because it seemed to them that, after many years of efforts, advocacy and funds being poured into the ministry, the indigenous peoples are still far from being developed, poverty still beset them and there are minimal indications that they have been empowered. On the other hand, there was also a resistance from the indigenous peoples themselves against the so-called development that puts their culture, tradition, ancestral domain and identity at risk. Tauli-Corpuz, an advocate for the indigenous peoples, outlined the conditions for a self-determined development for the indigenous peoples. These conditions, I believe, entails a relationship of trust and respect. This has encouraged me to look and reflect deeply into our manner of working with the Dulangan Manobo people as church workers/missionaries. My intuition was leading towards reflecting on our relationship with them.

In the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II) held from January 20-February 17, 1991, the indigenous peoples were identified as a “special concern.” The challenge of the document to those working with the indigenous peoples is to change our regard of them as “not quite Filipinos” because they have not assimilated into the mainstream system. It says further that, in working with them, we must “prevent the majority from imposing any process of integration or assimilation that would result in cultural stagnation or erosion.”

The Episcopal Commission on Indigenous Peoples (ECIP) was created in order to address the over-all concerns of the indigenous peoples in every diocese, in order to make a point that the indigenous peoples are not to be regarded only according to their social or economic conditions and be lumped into the social apostolate of the Church. They are to be treated as dialogue partners and not as beneficiaries of its charity. In Kulaman, we have often corrected the idea that “indigenous” is not synonymous to “indigent” even if these words might sound the same. We are accustomed to calling them beneficiaries or clientele. But what kind of relationship really best enhances our indigenous peoples’ apostolate? What happens if in the Gospel imperative of John 15:13, we consider the Dulangan Manobos as our friends?

#### **To Lay Down One’s Life for One’s Friends**

At this point, we shall explore the insights of John 15:13 and its interplay with the traditional practices and values of the Dulangan Manobo people. In this way, we would be able to appreciate and celebrate the insights from within the culture itself and not apart from it. It is our hope that this will deepen our relationship with the Manobo because we are able to touch these insights from the holy ground of their culture and tradition.

We need to, first and foremost, define the meaning of service. What does it mean when it is done in the spirit of friendship? Schneiders identifies three models of service. The first model is when a person is bound and coerced to serve because of the right of the other to be served. The second model is when a person voluntarily or freely serves because he or she has the capacity that could be shared to the other. She moves on to say that both models express inequality. One is about domination and the other a sense of superiority.

Most often, the second model is in operation when working with the Dulangan Manobos. There is a sense of being responsible for their well-being and to promote development. As missionaries, we have used developmental models in our work with the Dulangan Manobos which, in one sense, enhanced the professional aspects of our work. We have learned how to write project proposals with efficiency and have presented goals and objectives in our work of education, health and livelihood development and community organizing. They all looked good on paper. But in the process, we are inadvertently risking the loss of the soul of our engagement with the people. We, at times, have used them as means to our ends. We become disappointed and disheartened for not being able to achieve our goals and experience compassion fatigue because we perceive that what we continue doing is reinforcing the dole-out mentality. But where do we really base our certainty on this matter? Do the people themselves understand this to be so? Are they really caught in the cycle of dependency?

Schneiders proposes a third model in which service arises out of friendship where human relationship is based on equality, which is characterized by reciprocity and mutuality. For her, the Gospel imperative in John 15:13 is giving one’s life not in the spirit of sacrifice but as self-gift. She says further: “It may be heroic to die for another, but it is only genuine service if the other is truly another self, a friend, for in this case the gift of one’s life is experienced as enrichment rather than as an impoverishment of oneself.” In other words, a person giving himself or herself in service in the spirit of friendship does not consider the other as other but a part of himself or herself. What might this look like in the context of the indigenous peoples’

apostolate?

In indigenous peoples' apostolate, there were those who have lost their lives in their struggle for justice. Both missionaries and indigenous peoples have been martyred as they advocate for the rights of the people. Violence is not a stranger to us in Mindanao. This is the ultimate sacrifice that a person can make. It is part of service, as described by Schneiders:

In service, the server lays aside, temporarily or even permanently, his or her own project, goal, good, or at least convenience for the sake of fostering the good of the other. The finality of the served is allowed, at least for the moment, to take priority over the finality of the server. In its most extreme form, therefore, it would consist in the server's laying down his or her life for the sake of the served.

So far, in our work with the Dulangan Manobo people, we have not experienced extreme violence unlike in other places. Our area is relatively peaceful. But there is the daily "dying" as we cultivate our friendship with the people.

In friendship with the Dulangan Manobos in the context of mission, one lays down one's life in such a way that one refuses to enter into a power structure but rather a relational structure. A missionary is not the benefactor and the people, the beneficiaries. Indeed, there is a difference between an aid and a gift. When one is touched by friendship, the service rendered is freely given as a gift. We can best learn from some of the traditional practices of the people.

The Manobos have a deep sense of community. When they harvest, they give a *tangga*, which is a portion of the harvest, to their relatives or friends to celebrate with them the gift of the land. We, ourselves, have received it. Sometimes, they come with some bananas, coffee beans and mountain rice. Oftentimes, we feel that we need to give money to them in return because we could see their poverty yet they are capable of sharing whatever they have even in the limitation of their resources. In our work in Kulaman, in serving the Manobos, perhaps, it is also a kind of a *tangga*. From the abundance of other people, through the funding agencies, through us, missionaries, we offer this *tangga* to share to them what we, ourselves, enjoy like good education, good health and access to resources. A *tangga* is never required but a gift that is freely given with no expectation of return. In this sense, what is considered as supposedly "aid," in the spirit of friendship, becomes a gift and the act of giving ceases to be perpetuating a dole-out mentality. In times of crisis, when resources are scarce, to a friend, the act of giving becomes an expression of one's companionship presence in the midst of their struggle.

Another example of a Manobo tradition is the *egletus*, which is the celebration of the harvest of new rice. Rice is very important to the Manobos. They call "year" as *palay* referring to the rice season which is cultivated only in the highlands once a year in contrast with the lowland wet farming of three times a year. When the new rice is celebrated, it is customary that a person in the family does not taste the harvest until they are together for the occasion. They are willing to wait until everyone can share in the harvest. This is an expression of the depth of companionship. In this way, we could also see the sharing of our resources in our ministry. Everyone can taste the "harvest" because they matter to us as friends. The relational structure that friendship brings invites sympathy and empathy as we engage with the people. This develops a sense of belonging as mutual relationship is developed. In this context, it becomes natural for a missionary to include in her horizon the welfare of the people whom she serves as friends. She is pained at the sight of injustice, cruelty, discrimination and grinding poverty. As friendship deepens, she sees the "other" as intrinsically part of her. The experience becomes more personal and not just work.

One lays down one's life for one's friends when a missionary withholds her own judgment, preferences and dreams to accommodate and listen to her friend. We can humbly admit to ourselves that the worldview of the indigenous peoples is different from ours. They certainly have their own manner of interpreting events and situation. As we honor this difference in an intercultural situation, we enter into dialogue with the people, their tradition and culture. The indigenous peoples have experienced enough imposition and bombardment of ideas. Other people seem to know what is best for them. Allowing the process of dialogue is to open oneself and withhold one's judgment. The Dulangan Manobos have a tradition of conflict resolution called *antang* where conflicting parties, with the mediation of an elder called *datu*, enter into the process. What is admirable is the capacity of each party to subordinate their own ideas in order to reach an agreement or a compromise and come away with a renewed relationship.

I used to judge that the Manobos do not seem to do enough in their farms because of my observation that large portions are left uncultivated. One Saturday, I had the opportunity to work for a day to weed a 50 sq meters *camote* patch in our farm. Two girls were assisting me, mostly to educate me on what weeds to pull. They were watching me in case I would pull out the plants.

With all the hard work that I did, I was only able to do a portion of the farm. I imagined a Manobo mother with two children working in the farm. They would only be able to clear as much as I did. With manual work, very little could be done. I understood why the Manobos are on a subsistence level. Without the use of machines or money to hire workers they would not be able to clear much land. I changed my view about them.

To lay down one's life for one's friend is to willingly surrender her preoccupation with the outcome or success. In 2016, there was a severe rat infestation in Kulaman. Since it is the tradition, the Manobos still planted rice. When I asked them about their rice plantation, I was told that the rice is getting infested by the rats. I responded that it was better not to have planted rice at all because it was just a waste of their labor. They told me that there will always be something left behind during harvest time. This touched me very deeply. I am usually disheartened by some Manobo students who do not finish their education. I often grumble that they should have not started in the first place if in the end they could not finish. But I have also observed that those who have gone through our center were rendering significant service in their communities as leaders, teachers, organizers and facilitators. The outcome is not exactly what I expect but nothing is really lost. This traditional value could help us to be more forgiving in the ministerial situation when our goals and objectives could not be met by the people due to various factors. It also challenges us to be less demanding of the people to reach a particular outcome according to what we hope for. It opens us to a more "organic" way of facilitating our work through discernment of where the people would hope to go and not where we wish to lead them.

To lay down one's life for one's friend is to be humble enough to receive help from others. The song goes, "Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant, too." This allows mutuality to be experienced in the relationship. There is a traditional practice of the Manobo that exemplifies mutuality. It is called *pintakasi*. The community offers to help and assist a family in their farm work and they take turns in helping each other all throughout the year. The mutual service is sustaining and enabling each household. At times, it is hard to accept help from the people we serve. This is the best test of the depth of friendship when we are able to do so. In the center, it has been our practice to allow the parents to do voluntary service. Sometimes, we hesitate, considering that it is indeed a loss in their work day. In one occasion, an elder, after a hard day's work in the farm bid us farewell and generously left an invitation, "Sisters, if you need anything, do not hesitate to call us. We would be happy to come!" It was an extraordinary generosity that they extended towards us. I suppose, it was an empowering experience for them to be allowed to assist us for a change. There was also one occasion when I did not know what to do in order to get a government health benefit for the patient I was accompanying. Then, a former student came and approached me, introduced herself and told me that she could facilitate the processing of the documents. I was so relieved.

These are some of the Manobo tradition that enrich our understanding of friendship as a Gospel imperative in John 15:13. In this context, every mission engagement becomes a testament of friendship with the people. When we come away after we get transferred, we carry them in our hearts and not forget them because, we came, we were touched and we became friends. Very recently, I was a witness to a reunion of a former missionary in Kulaman. She visited again after so many years. Most of the students whom she cared for are already in their thirties, most of them are already mothers. They did not expect that they would see her again. The reunion was full of tears of joy. I saw in that event what it meant to be a missionary. The connection they had with her did not fade with time.

These are only some of the examples of Manobo values and cultural practices that enriches the theological insights of John 15:13. As we continue to live in and among the Manobos, we would be able to strengthen and cultivate these in our being and experience to some extent being one with them.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

In summary, we have explored the context of the inspirational gospel text in order to situate the different experiences and insights of being a missionary among the Dulangan Manobo people. This is helpful in our reflection of the different instances a missionary is called to do the gospel imperative as she engages with the people.

We intuit that there needs a significant change in the way we view our relationship with the Manobo people in order to be fully present in their lives. As missionaries, we are invited to relate with them in friendship which is mutual, respectful and life-giving in addition to our efficiency in our work with them. At times, the memories of the relationship that was built up is what the people remembers and not really the achievements of the missionary.

We have also explored the insights in John 15:13 so that we may be able to outline the gospel imperative of friendship in the context of the life and words of Jesus. We defined

friendship in terms of the gospel bearing in mind that there are many ways to define the term from a shallow to a more complex understanding of the relationship. In doing so, we are able to enter fully into the message of the gospel.

In this friendship, we are impelled in our mission to lay down our life. A variety of examples of actual experience of the Manobo tradition and values were explored in order to enable a fruitful engagement and encounter with them in our apostolate. These examples involved a certain level of *kenosis* in order to be life-giving to the other. However, this self-sacrificing act is not a diminishment but rather an enrichment of oneself, too, because the other, who is a friend is enriched. The experience of fullness of life becomes mutual for both.

In using the Manobo tradition and values, we endeavor to practice the idea presented in this paper. This will facilitate a deepening of the relationship because we are able to “translate” these gospel values into something that the people would be able to resonate with. But in actual fact, we did not “translate” but we have only found the treasure that was inherently there in the culture. We only allowed ourselves to be touched deeply in order to be transformed.

In this way, as we encountered Jesus through St. John’s Gospel, we also encountered him in our friendship with the people. Here, we see the dynamism of friendship of the missionary with Jesus and the people which broadens the experience in such a way that the Divine is encountered in both the Word and living with the people. Indeed, a relational way of being, as modelled by Jesus in the gospel of St. John offers us a way of being that is transformational wherein each of us experience fullness of life.

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