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A voice for the Philippines' poorest

by Thomas C. Fox



Auxiliary Bishop Broderick Pabillo of Manila, right, joins farmers' hunger strike for land reform outside the halls of congress in Quezon City in December 2008. (Romeo Ranoco/Reuters)

MANILA, PHILIPPINES -- *As a young, idealistic seminarian, Broderick Pabillo would talk to his classmates about the need, as future church ministers, to live and work among the poor and to find sustenance from them. This was the kind of talk his Salesian mentors encouraged.*

On weekends the seminarians would do parish work, often in the poor parishes in and around this capital city. But on Sunday evening they would return to the seminary. Pabillo remembers feeling frustrated by the situation.

?There [in the seminary] you had a clean place, enough food, a comfortable bed. The poor people you worked with, meanwhile, would remain where they were, in their situation, their poverty.?

Once a priest, Pabillo worked and taught in Manila for almost a decade, though the desire to live among the poor never left him. Eventually he asked to be transferred to the rural Philippines, checking a church directory to see which diocese might be in need of a priest.

In 1999, at the age of 44, he found himself in the Philippine province of Palawan. It was a narrow archipelago of some 1,700 islands tucked along the western border. By some measures it is a breathtakingly beautiful place to live. However, it is also one of the poorest regions in the Philippines. Many of its people did not have potable water, adequate sanitation facilities, or electricity. Many were illiterate and malnourished, and few could afford to send their children to school.

Pabillo was finally getting his wish.

For two years he lived in a small hut with barely enough room for a single bed. Word of his presence spread. Interest in the priest's mission grew. Soon a small Christian community was taking shape in the area. The locals pitched in and built a small church where the priest celebrated Mass.

Yet Pabillo recognized most of the people of the region had no means to get to the church. So he decided he would go to them. With no vehicle, he began taking trips by jeepneys, the colorful, small buses the local people use for transportation. Catholics would put him up for the night and he would celebrate Mass in the morning.

He remained in Palawan for seven years, building church and Christian communities ? until May 2006, when, to Pabillo's complete surprise, he was appointed by Pope Benedict XVI to be the auxiliary bishop of Manila, in charge of the social action office.

NCR spoke with Pabillo in his modest office in central Manila during a recent trip, asking him about what lessons living with the poor had taught him and how the transfer back to Manila has gone.

NCR: Has it been difficult?

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Pabillo: Yeah. It's been difficult. When I was in Palawan I would move around, sleep in local houses, staying with the local people. It was a simpler life.

What did you learn from that experience?

A lot of things. I learned how they manage with so little. I learned from their solidarity, the way they care for each other. At the same time, I could see how people take advantage of them because of their lack of education.

Poverty is not only a matter of lacking things. It is also can be an openness to God and neighbor, a solidarity with others, and trust in God.

I think everyone should have enough to meet their needs, but those needs should take into consideration the needs of others. I might think that having two pairs of shoes is enough for me. But if the people around me don't have shoes at all, then my second pair is already an extra pair for me. So we should not look only at our own needs, but also the needs of the people around us. That will determine what enough is.

What is your work in the social action office?

We work with meeting material needs, like housing and job placements. But my position also gives me a

voice to speak out against oppression.

Being a bishop, one has more influence. When I speak I get quoted in the newspapers. I can also go and talk to government officials and to those in big companies. I can bring the concerns and grievances of the poor to them. Otherwise they would not hear these voices.

Can you give me some examples?

Last December, there was an issue on an island in the Philippines where there was Norwegian mining planned. It would have destroyed the habitat of our indigenous people and the poor farmers there. That whole island was against it. The people came to me. I arranged that they could speak with the secretary of the Department of Natural Resources. When the secretary did not really hear them, I wrote an open letter and put it in a newspaper, talking about their plight. Because of that the secretary decided to speak with them and they were able to work out a compromise.

Two years ago I went on a hunger strike together with some farmers who were asking for some land reform. It was given six months later, but only after a lot of lobbying in congress and with the president.

How long did you have to fast to get a hearing?

Four days.

Meanwhile, a lot of other people come to me in need of medicine or jobs. I can refer them to our social action services and offices. Increasingly, as you speak out, more and more poor people look to you as a voice. Many come here asking for help. Some we can help. Some we cannot. Some I refer to their own bishops.

How do you find the energy to keep going?

I spend time in prayer. Besides the regular Mass, I make it a point to spend two hours a day in prayer. Sometimes I read. Sometimes I meditate.

What kind of meditation?

Sometimes just a breathing meditation or a centering prayer. Sometimes, it's a conversation with God. Last year, I was praying only one hour a day, but I realized I needed to do more prayer. With a lot more problems I need to take more time to be at peace and to be more centered. So this year I decided that I would make it two hours. And I'm struggling to find the two hours.

What messages are Asians trying to share with the rest of the church?

One would be about prayer, contemplation and meditation. This is coming especially from the Buddhists. They are very strong in this. That would be their message. For us in the Philippines, our message is about a kind of spirituality. Our spirituality is more shown by means of a public expression of the faith. This popular religion is very strong in the Philippines. Another message from Asia is a message about poverty and simplicity. It has to do with living more simply, about having a more simple, less cluttered lifestyle. Those are a few of our messages.

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