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Boxer Manny Pacquiao invited to Philippines priests' meeting

by N.J. Viehland



Bishop Dinualdo Gutierrez of Marbel (N.J. Viehland)

MANILA, Philippines -- World boxing champ Emmanuel "Manny" Pacquiao is expected to tell priests at their recollection Tuesday how the Bible is helping him live an upright life and why he is in their corner in the bout against destructive mining.

Some of the 72 diocesan and religious priests serving in the Marbel diocese are to gather Tuesday in Pacquiao's mansion in General Santos City, southern Philippines, for their bimonthly joint recollection, Bishop Dinualdo Gutierrez of Marbel told *NCR* on Sunday.

Pacquiao, the first boxer to be world champion in eight divisions, has built himself a 35 million peso (\$820,000) house in the city. On May 2010, he was elected representative for Sarangani's lone district in the House of Representatives.

Joining the priest's recollection was his initiative, Gutierrez said. *Sarangani Sanggunian Panlalawigan* (Provincial Government) Board Member Eugene Alzate went to the Gutierrez's office in Koronadal on Jan. 7 to invite the bishop to dinner with Pacquiao at the boxer's mansion Jan. 9. A priests' gathering was already scheduled for that evening in the bishops' residence, so Gutierrez declined and instead invited Pacquiao to the dinner.

Pacquiao offered to host the March recollection of the clergy in his mansion during the January dinner, and there was no objection among the 35 priests present, Gutierrez said.

"This is a regular monthly recollection," the bishop said.

"Usually we have resource persons" at the dinners, Gutierrez said. "We ask our laypeople to share their experiences sometimes so we will learn from our laity. We are talking, for example, of married life. How could priests speak fully of married life?"

He said Pacquiao is being received in the recollection in that context.

After 9 a.m. praise, Pacquiao is scheduled to speak on how to read the Bible and on his position against mining, Gutierrez said.

"He is rabidly anti-mining," he said, quoting Pacquiao's remark that destruction done by the Tampakan Copper-Gold Project "should not be allowed."

The project plans to clear 3,935 hectares of forest, including rainforests, to build open-pit mines. The mines will tap what are reportedly the largest undeveloped copper-gold deposits in the Southeast Asia-Western Pacific region.

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The project has the largest foreign investment in the Philippines at \$5.9 billion in American dollars and a promise of thousands of jobs, and former President Gloria Arroyo and President Benigno Aquino III have cited Tampakan as a flagship project of minerals development. However, the bishops and church-based and environmental groups, indigenous communities, local governments and the communist rebel movement oppose the project, citing concern for environment, people's health, food sources and other social effects.

Gutierrez said priests from the KIDMADI group of dioceses, which include the Marbel, Kidapawan and Digos dioceses, are scheduled to meet Tuesday to discuss their movement to stop the Philippines-based affiliate Sagittarius Mines, Inc. (SMI) from pushing ahead with the project.

SMI developed and operates the project for shareholders of Brisbane-based Xstrata Copper, Indophil Resources NL in Melbourne and Tampakan Group of companies.

As of January, total mineral resources for the Tampakan deposit were estimated to reach 2.94 billion tons.

However, South Cotabato Provincial Board on June 2010 enacted an environment code that prohibits the open-pit mining method, though the Mining Act of 1995 does not disallow this. The Environment Management Bureau has denied SMI an environment compliance certificate citing the provincial code, and SMI is appealing the decision.

Pacquiao could not be reached for comment. Alzate, busy preparing for Tuesday's recollection, confirmed the boxer-politician's opposition to mining in the province, especially the reported plan to use open-pit mines and coal-fired plants in the Tampakan project.

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Alzate told *NCR* on Monday that Pacquiao would also explain to the priests why he opposes the RH Bill, which would provide for "a comprehensive policy on responsible parenthood, reproductive health and population and development," as its title reads.

Catholic bishops and pro-life groups are also lobbying against the bill's passage. Debate on the bill is currently stalled, and proponents have asked Congress to end 12 years of deliberations on the bill and to vote on it.

Whether or not Pacquiao attends the recollection, Gutierrez said the priests will go ahead with their anti-mining meeting and recollection. After the anti-SMI meeting Tuesday, priests will play basketball against Team Pac-man (Pacquiao's nickname).

Journalist Edwin Espejo, who reportedly faces a multi-million-peso libel case filed against him by Pacquiao lawyers, cautioned church leaders.

"It would be good if church leaders would be more circumspect" in their relationship with Pacquiao, said Espejo, a longtime "Pacquiao watcher."

However, Gutierrez says a tax probe of Pacquiao and speculations about the clergy's ties with the boxer-politician do not disturb him.

"Legal cases are for his lawyers and accountants to deal with," Gutierrez said. "Election or no election, he's one of our parishioners, and we treat him as such. He is offering help. But of course, I will never ask him for anything. I just asked him if he would like to help in the Bible campaign of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines."

Pacquiao has said he has chosen to reform his ways and to turn to the Bible for help in doing so.

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