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Philippines religious keep alive monsignor's drive against poverty

by N.J. Viehland



Sisters of Mary and their Girlstown students welcome Archbishop Luis Antonio Tagle of Manila. (N.J. Viehland)

CAVITE, Philippines -- Manila's Archbishop Luis Antonio Tagle challenged Sisters of Mary, Brothers of Christ and the thousands of students celebrating Monsignor Aloysius Schwartz's 20th death anniversary Friday to emulate the example of love and humility of their founder and to keep his legacy alive.

Later, almost like a pep rally for the nuns and priests, Korean students of his schools beat drums and banged gongs in a musical number for the Tribute Concert for Fr. Al after lunch that day.

Schwartz followed Christ and worked to uphold the value of human dignity in his various projects, Tagle said in his message at the end of the thanksgiving Mass on Friday at Girlstown gym in Silang, Cavite, south of Manila. He said the priest's efforts to build children's villages were motivated by a deep love for the poor.

Born in Washington D.C., on Sept. 18, 1930, "Father Al," as Schwartz is known here, reportedly entered St. Charles seminary in Maryland at 14 years old and finished his Bachelor of Arts degree at Maryknoll Seminary College in Glen Ellyn, Ill. He studied theology at Louvain Catholic University in Belgium and became exposed to poor sectors in Europe, including rag-pickers' camps, and nurtured a deep devotion the Virgin of the Poor in Banneux, Belgium.

Shortly after being ordained a diocesan priest in 1957, he left to take up an assignment in Busan, Korea, as the East Asian country reeled from the Korean War (1950-1953). He established Boystown and Girlstown in Busan in 1962, providing education from kindergarten through technical and vocational courses as well as junior college for more than 1,000 of the most underprivileged children. He founded the Religious Congregation of the Sisters of Mary in 1964 to "serve the poorest of the poor."

Schwartz also built hospitals for indigent patients and hospices for the homeless, handicapped, elderly men, mentally challenged children and unwed mothers. In 1981, he founded the priests' congregation Brothers of Christ.

When he was given the Asia's premier prize, the Ramon Magsaysay Award for International Understanding, in 1983, his citation said Schwartz raised three-fourths of his annual budget of about \$8 million at the time.

Cardinal Jaime Sin, then archbishop of Manila, reportedly invited Schwartz to help the Philippines church's apostolate to children and youth. About 30 percent of the 98 million Filipinos live below the poverty line, and 26.5 percent of children under 5 are malnourished, Save the Children reports. "Education is the only hope for children to break free of poverty," the Sisters of Mary maintain.

Schwartz's health deteriorated after he was diagnosed with the terminal illness Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (Lou Gehrig's disease) in 1989, but he was able to establish Boystown and Girlstown in Mexico. In 1992, just before he died, he named Korean Sr. Michaela Kim his successor and director of his charity programs. She was named Superior General after he died on March 16, 1992.

Children, women religious, priests and guests joined in prayer and offered flowers during the blessing of his tomb in the Girlstown compound, where participants from the Philippines, Korea, Guatemala and other countries released balloons and butterflies before Friday's Mass.

In his message after Mass, Tagle also urged the more than 2,000 high school girls present to search for

true meaning and purpose in life.

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"What are you living for?" he asked them.

He said they must have a deeper purpose than just getting a job or earning money. He also reminded them to "keep in mind your dignity as a woman." Be humble and compassionate when you graduate and succeed in life, he said. Do not be proud and look down on those who didn't go to school.

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He also encouraged the male students from Boystown to search for deeper meaning in life, avoid jumping into marriage and to remember to respect women. He invited them to consider joining the priesthood.

The case for sainthood

Monsignor Jesus Romulo Ranada of Novaliches diocese, who wrote a book on Schwartz, said in his homily that in Rome, Augustinian Recollect Fr. Samson Silloriquuez, main postulator of the cause of sainthood of Schwartz, was submitting more reports.

The Manila archdiocese received approval from Rome for the cause for beatification and canonization of Schwartz on May 20, 2005. The position paper for the heroic virtues of the servant of God was submitted to Rome in January 2009, and further research was done.

However, Ranada said it could take a while before a response arrives. He cited the pile of causes for beatification of other people, saying those with reported miracles are likely to be taken up first.

Schwartz used to tell the sisters that his wish for the Sisters of Mary was to "show to the world your love for one another, and when you love one another, that would be enough to sustain you," Ranada said. "He used to tell the Sisters of Mary, The Virgin of the Poor would help you."

Ranada added, "Now, 20 years after Father Al's death, the Sisters of Mary have continued his work not only here in the Philippines, Korea and Mexico, but also in Guatemala and Brazil."

He said during his research, he found youths in various countries speaking with great gratitude to Schwartz, even though they had not met him. He credited the sisters with "conveying Father Al's love for the poor" to today's students.

Children's villages

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Sisters of Mary villages in the Philippines offer live-in secondary education with intensive vocation training for boys and girls 12-18 years old who come from the "poorest of the poor."

Two Girlstowns and two Boystowns in the Philippines have dormitories, workshops for sewing and other vocational skills, classrooms, auditoriums, swimming pools, basketball courts and other facilities on sprawling lots.

Reizque Palo, a graduate who was at Friday's Mass celebrating Schwartz, told *NCR* she joined Girlstown because her family has eight children and her father could not send them to school on a temporary driver's wages.

"Homesickness was the toughest battle for me," she said. Now a wife and mother, she praised the program for giving "a lot of time to study."

After graduating from high school at 17, the sisters helped train her to sew garments, but pulled her out when they learned the salary she received was low. They found her another job as a secretary, where she worked for six years. Nuns and teachers at the Mass were Girlstown students.

Relevant mission response to poverty

Is this institutional approach relevant and helpful in solving poverty at its root?

"I know some people would say the approach of the sisters does not address the structural roots of the problem, but I beg to disagree," Tagle told *NCR*. "First of all, mission is not a one-dimension reality. It is a multifaceted reality. There is proclamation, there is prayer, there are relationships, there is advocacy, there is all of these things."

He said no one person can claim he or she "can encompass the totality of mission. In the same way, no single group in the church can claim that they have all the secrets for mission. Mission is complex as it is, and its different layers must be an ecclesial event."

He stressed that the way Schwartz and his collaborators, the Sisters of Mary and the Brothers of Christ, handle mission is specific to their charism.

"What they are doing is definitely a contribution to the totality of mission, and they're dealing with specific groups of people in need of urgent response," he said.

"If you look closely at the roots of poverty, you cannot deny that it's not only structures or systems that have given rise to poverty, but there's lack of human development, lack of education, lack of access, lack of love, lack of caring and the basic respect that is due to the human person -- these are the things that make them poor."

Tagle said poverty is usually gauged only according to quantitative measures, such as amount of money one has or earns.

"But there are also social and cultural roots of poverty," he said. "These are the things this type of educational approach gives to the children and the poor. So, it is mission and it is providing in a way a response to the so-called structural evils leading to poverty in that specific dimension."

"To cite Pope Benedict XVI in his first encyclical, he said even if we have complied with all the demands of justice, people will still look for love," Tagle said. "People will still hunger for love. So our fight against dehumanizing poverty should not be reduced to providing all the opportunities for earning money and for employment. All of these are good, but let us also give love."

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