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Cardinal-designate 'Chito' known in Philippines for theology, humility

by Catholic News Service

Vatican City — The Filipino cardinal announced Wednesday is widely lauded for his theological gifts and his humility.

Cardinal-designate Luis Tagle, 55, of Manila, Philippines, "really takes care of people ... he's so simple and generous and there's no class structure when he deals with people; everyone is equal in his eyes," said Nemie Anciado, a longtime custodian at the cathedral in Imus, Philippines, where the cardinal-designate was bishop from 2001 to 2011.

Anciado spoke to Catholic News Service in October 2011, after his bishop was named archbishop of Manila. One year later, Pope Benedict XVI announced he would make him a cardinal in a consistory at the Vatican Nov. 24.

Tagle told CNS on Wednesday that the month of October, which is the month of the rosary, "is big for me." He was informed in October 2001 that he would become a bishop and was told he'd be transferred to Manila in October 2011. "And now it's October again," he said, laughing.

Describing to CNS what it was like to hear the announcement that he was being elevated Wednesday, Tagle fought back tears.

"Listening to the text of the pope's letter being read out to me, I also felt like -- here it comes," he said. "It felt like someone far greater than I am is here. Very near."

Admirers have widely lauded the theological gifts of the archbishop known as "Chito."

"The depth of his understanding of theology was already at a far more superior level during our college years," said Ricardo Jalbuena, who attended Jesuit-run Ateneo De Manila University's San Jose Major Seminary with him. "It was always enlightening to have Chito around."

Jalbuena described the cardinal-designate as a gifted speaker who does not shy away from modern media.

"He's familiar with (it) such that God's word could be readily communicated and understood by all," he said.

In an interview earlier this year on the Salt and Light TV program "Witness," Tagle told Basilian Fr. Thomas Rosica that he grew up wanting to be a medical doctor. But, he said with a laugh, all the church programs for young people confused him, and he entered the seminary.

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During his seminary years, the Philippines was under martial law, and the seminary classes emphasized "the call for the church to be on the side of the poor, to be the voice of the voiceless."

He later was sent to study theology at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., where he was mentored by two prominent theologians: Jesuit Fr. Avery Dulles, who later became a cardinal, and Fr. Joseph Komonchak, who remains a professor emeritus at the university.

The cardinal-designate said he learned many things from Dulles, but especially humility and to be a learner. From Komonchak, he said, he learned to listen to all the different approaches to the truth.

In the Salt and Light interview, he spoke of the relationship between pastoral work and theology, describing pastoral work as "guiding people to the faith. And that's what theology is all about."

"Theology is at the service of the faith of the people," he said, adding "good theology should be understandable to people, and it even should help them deepen their encounter with the Lord."

Last December, during his installation Mass in Manila, Tagle called on the faithful to look at reality through Jesus' eyes.

"Then we see differently," he said. "A child, especially the unborn, is no longer seen as a burden, but a gift. The youth are not a problem but a promise. Women are not objects but persons. Laborers are not machines but partners. The poor are not a nuisance but our jewels, and creation is not an object of manipulation but a sign of God's sustaining love."

In a 2008 address to the International Eucharistic Congress in Quebec, he spoke of being evangelized by Catholics: a woman shutting down her business early to go to a prayer meeting, a poor girl of 13 honest enough to say she did not qualify for a food program.

Fr. Allan Valero, who worked with the cardinal-designate in Imus, called him the kind of person "everyone always wants to be around."

"He enjoys what he does; whenever he has bloopers or makes mistakes, he can still laugh at himself," said Father Valero. "He can be serious, of course, when need be, but he can always look at the lighter side of things."

"He encourages people, he delegates work. He trusts people to work with him. And that's how we learn," the priest said.

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