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A Filipino prophet

by Phyllis Zagano

Just Catholic

Richard Pulga died five days after Typhoon Haiyan rampaged across the fragile lands called the Philippines. In another time, another place, the healthy 27-year-old still would be alive.

Richard Pulga is a prophet. You can say all you want about climate change and greed and poverty. But the life and death of this Filipino farmer gives strongest evidence of the three.

If you've turned a deaf ear to climate change, turn around and listen up. The greenhouse effect they talk about is real. The sun shines away and heats the earth -- more when the sky is clear, but even when it is not. The fuels we use make smoke and smog that wrap a blanket around the earth. It keeps the heat from going out to space. The world is getting hotter, and the weather is more dangerous.

Greed comes to every human heart in one way or another. No matter what, we want more of it: more money, more food, more space, more time, and more power, even as none of these fills our needs. We grasp at each and hold on tenaciously, unable to share the penny or the piece of bread. We want room to move around in. We want leisure. And we want control. But more for the almighty "me" can mean less for somebody else, immediately or eventually.

So poverty crouches at every turn of life, waiting for the smallest opening to set its teeth into the private cycle of birth and death. It grabs on someplace -- a hand, a mind, a back, a leg -- and it does not let go. When it comes to us, we may not see it coming. When it comes to someone else, we may not notice.

So with Richard Pulga, who sent his wife and children on to safer ground as wind and water threatened all he had: rice fields on 2 acres, some coconut trees and a little house. He stayed there as the tempest wound its gnarled hand around a coconut and hurled it at his leg.

The storm left. They patched him up and got him to a hospital. He lay there on a metal gurney in the hall, awaiting help. He got the most attention from *The New York Times*.

You know the rest of the story. It circled the globe like a moon reflecting poverty, greed and climate change back on all of us. Pulga got nothing but a saline drip for five days. They did not clean him. They did not clean his wound, an infected bleeding compound fracture of the lower leg that slowly drove his body into septic shock.

He died.

Pulga died with his wife weeping that she wanted to bring him home, a home that is gone. He died because at the first hospital, they told his aunt who had no money she should just take him away. He died because they could not save him at the next hospital, the one where they cut off this strong man's leg.

He died with doctors saying he did not have to die, that his death could have been prevented.

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What is this simple prophet telling us?

The Philippines' 7,107 islands float in the Pacific Ring of Fire, where typhoons often come. There, 98 million people's lives mirror the flora and fauna. Some are rich, very rich. Some are simple. Some are more than poor.

No matter, rich or poor: The storm took no prisoners as it washed away buildings, dreams and families. The numbers tell only part of the story. In a small town, they buried 27 members of one family alone.

Yes, world governments have sent ships and planes and helicopters. Yes, their navies and armies are dropping water, food and medicine.

But where are the voices of reason? Where are the voices that blame air pollution caused by cheaper means of making heat or steel? Where are the voices that blame the faster cars that let more people with more money ride alone? Where are the voices that blame concentrations of power that favor themselves?

Unlike the prophet Jeremiah, Richard Pulga did not need to bury a linen belt to learn that everything is fragile. He did not need to smash a clay jar to convince us things are passing. Yet like his brother Jeremiah, he has taught us more than we want to know about our individual and our corporate weaknesses. Can we learn? Will we?

[Phyllis Zagano is senior research associate-in-residence at Hofstra University and author of several books in Catholic studies. Her newest book is *Mysticism and the Spiritual Quest: A Crosscultural Anthology*, and her recent books include *Women & Catholicism* (Palgrave-Macmillan), *Women in Ministry: Emerging Questions about the Diaconate* (Paulist Press) and *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future* (with Gary Macy and William T. Ditewig, Paulist Press). She will speak March 13 at Rockhurst University in Kansas City, Mo.]

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