

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title	Page
Scriptural Text	3
Dedication	4
Acknowledgements	5
Foreword	6
Introduction by the Secondary Author	7
CHAPTER I – THE FARMER SOWS	
Life is Precious	10
Second Birthdays	13
The Barber and the Housekeeper	15
Elda's Sacrifice	18
The Shepherd Clad in Benedictine Habit	20
Leftovers are not Just for the Doggies	22
Loving Touches - More Than Solar Energy	24
The Story of the Nipa Hut	26
Love Consists of Apples...	29
CHAPTER II –THE FERTILIZER: “VALUES”	
Mother Superior's Discipline	32
Division of Labor	34
The Daily Visits	36
Being...Rather than Doing and Having	39
Even without a Single Penny	41
Of Lies and Pretenses	42
Sermon at the Barbershop	44
More than Medals and Honors	46
CHAPTER III – THE SEED GERMINATES	
God Answers at the Right Time	49
Laying the Pillars	52
My Friend...My Real Lifetime One	55
Two J.A.'s and Lessons We Learned from One Another	57
My Naomi	60

CHAPTER IV – WATER FOR THE DRY SOIL

When Everything I have is not Enough	64
Life in the Spirit	66
Discerning God's Will	69
The Three Temptations	72
Holy Indifference	74

CHAPTER V – GROWING AND BEARING FRUIT

Life Begins at 40	77
"We Five Commit"- Start of My Parish Ministry	80
God Will Make a Way	82
It's Not All a Bed of Roses!	85
The Greater Call	88
Inner Voices and Conversations	92

CHAPTER VI – HARVEST TIME

Obedient Like a Soldier	97
God's Affirmations	99
Knock...Knock...God Are You There?	101
It Rains Again...and It Pours	103
Beyond All, What Keeps Us Together?	105
Needs Rather Than Wants	107
More Blessings	109
One Community...One Heart	110
One More Story...	112

CHAPTER VII – CONCLUSION

The Sowing Goes On...	115
Gratitude from the Bottom of My Heart	116

“A FARMER WENT OUT TO SOW SOME SEED. In the sowing, some fell on the footpath...some fell on rocky ground...some fell on thorns... But some fell on good soil, grew up, and yielded grain a hundredfold.”

(Luke 8:5-8a)

August 27, 2003

DEDICATION

*This book is dedicated to you, my readers, especially
my parents Hilario and Maria Lourdes,
my husband, Felino,
my children, Jasper Anthony and Joseph Augustine,
my brothers, Romeo, Fr. Hilario, O.P., Fortunato
and Cleofas,
my sisters, Sr. Delia O.S.B., Elfleda, Adoracion and
Rosemarie,
my in-laws,
my benefactors and friends,
and to all the persons that God allowed to be part of
my life.*

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FOREWORD

This booklet you hold in your hands is a parable of love. It narrates the love of the Farmer for his precious seed – how he nourished, protected, cultivated it in order that it may grow into a sheltering tree.

Within its pages are revealed the secrets of a life rooted in love. It will remind its readers of that famous autobiography of the Little Flower of Lisieux who summed up her life with the exclamation: “In the heart of the Church, I shall be Love!”

A parable makes the reader work to get the heart of its message. It is hidden in the lives of the people mentioned: an eloquent barber, a mother of 9, unselfish sisters and brothers, patient friends, a San Miguel mentor, a lifetime partner, a spiritual director...

But love’s epiphanies are radiant not only in people but in things too: in forbidden apples, in faded school uniforms, in left-over food, in a hut with a leaking roof...In the words of the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins:

*The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shookfoil...*

This is not the fairy tale of a Pollyanna but the story of a brave woman who endured humiliations, misunderstandings and searing pains – Love’s highway goes through Calvary. There she encounters her beloved crucified; there she discovers the meaning of her poverty and sufferings.

It is not your hands but your heart that will hold this manuscript. For when you read this parable of love you will know not only the story of a friend called Belle but more importantly and surprisingly you will discover the inner message of your own heart.

My vocation, at last I have found it...my Vocation is Love!

Antonio L. Ledesma
September 2003

INTRODUCTION BY THE SECONDARY AUTHOR

When I was a little girl, I wondered about the gospel “The Sower and the Seed”. I heard it very often and I was fascinated by this parable of Jesus. I was struck by the verse, “And some seeds fell on good soil and yielded grain a hundredfold”. As Jesus Himself explains the parable, I imagine myself as a “seed that fell on good soil”. And how I wished I would yield a plentiful harvest!

I chose FARMER in the title of this book instead of SOWER because the former comes closer to my heart. I grew up with the fruits of the farmer’s labor. From childhood up until now and I hope that for the rest of my life there would be enough supply of rice – a processed grain from the farmer’s harvest of palay. Where there is rice, a person is almost assured of not getting hungry. It is our staple food in the Philippines. This is how important the farmers are.

The FARMER in my life is GOD. He is the PRIMARY AUTHOR of this book. I am the SEED, the secondary author of this book.

I am very grateful to the FARMER for sowing me into this world. He took care of this SEED, nurtured it, cultivated it everyday, watered the soil from time to time and allowed the seed to bear fruit. Were it not for the loving hands of the FARMER, the seed would just remain a seed. Truly, “unless the grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much fruit” (John 12:24).

This book is written out of gratitude to the FARMER. It is divided into chapters that describe the life cycle of a seed. Chapter I is about the ways of the FARMER, how He sowed the seed. It is the story of my childhood years, the place that housed me, and the people who lavished me with love – my parents, brothers, sisters, grandparents, and benefactors. Chapter II contains stories about the ‘fertilizers’ that nurtured the seed, which are values that God formed in me from childhood. Chapter III contains stories of germination. These are the beginnings of the prime years of my life and the laying of foundations. Chapter IV contains stories of ‘dryness’ of the soil and how God provided “water”. The stories present the changing seasons in my life and renewal in my spiritual life. Chapter V contains stories of ‘growing and bearing fruit’. Stories are told about the growth in my ministry, the

times in my life when the enemy tried to wreak havoc in my spiritual path and the triumph of God. Finally, Chapter VI is 'harvest time'. It contains reflections on graces received from God and God's faithfulness.

I would like to invite the reader to go back to his or her own life stories and reflect on the hand of God in his or her own life. Surely, each one of my readers is also a seed with a unique and beautiful life cycle....

CHAPTER I

THE FARMER SOWS

LIFE IS PRECIOUS

“The Lord God formed man out of the clay of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and so man became a living being” (Gen. 2:7)
“Go, then, rejoice over the children of the righteous, who shall all be gathered together and shall bless the Lord of the ages. Happy are those who love you...”
(Tobit 13:13-14)

Maria Lourdes, a 42-year old woman approaches a Benedictine nun. Her anxious face shows how hard up she is. With all the complexities of life, amidst her poverty, she seems to be on the edge of giving up all hopes of a bright future. So tired of working for a day-to-day existence, sometimes or even most of the times, the meager income of her husband hardly able to make both ends meet. Now she’s bearing her 8th child. How could she ever manage? Yet, she comes to her constant benefactor for the usual help. The Benedictine nun doesn’t get tired of helping her nor does she make any remark about family planning! She treats the woman kindly and sees to it that she goes home with something like milk, rice, sugar, oats, old clothes, etc. She merely gives the woman her consoling smile and says, “They are gifts from the Lord!”

The 42-year old woman, who keeps her faith in God, kept praying and grew in piety even as she was experiencing ordeals in her family life. She often sought counsel from the Benedictines of San Fernando, whom she used to work for when she was still single. She would never forget the consoling remark of the nun, “They are gifts from the Lord!”

And true enough, for every child, a blessing! The woman is now 87 years old and she lives to see all her children as gifts from the Lord. So much life and love abound in this family. God made each one of them truly special. He ‘formed them and blew life into their nostrils’.

The eldest, Delia, from her adolescent years had kept the family members constantly on their knees to plead for Divine Providence. A scholarly mathematician, she nurtured a vocation that would someday be offered for the greater glory of God. She saw to it that the other eight of her siblings were self-reliant when she left for the convent. She is now a Benedictine nun. The second, Elfleda shared unselfishly her youthful years by giving up her schooling for a while in order to take care of the younger ones. Later she became an educator and a social worker for sometime. The third, Romeo did janitorial jobs in his younger years in order to pursue his studies and became one of the top sales managers of the country. Alongside with his profession, he dedicated a great part of his time as Eucharistic Minister for Distribution of Holy Communion or EMDC. Only after he met an accident that rendered him almost ineffectual did he realize that he had a gift for running his own restaurant. The fourth, Adoracion, the meekest of them all, became also an educator. A migrant worker, she became a lay missionary in Australia, preaching over radio about her Catholic faith. The fifth one, Hilario, Jr. obediently followed the will of God through the voice of his father when the latter asked him to serve God in a special ministry. He is now a Dominican priest. The sixth, Fortunato, the silent one and still a bachelor, became a vocational teacher. He is well loved for his thoughtfulness. The seventh one, Rosemarie is a resolute and self-sacrificing one. A business management graduate, she opted to give up her career in order to take care of her own family. Her constancy firms up the family's faith in Divine Providence. The ninth one, Cleofas, is equally brilliant. A civil and geodetic engineer turned pilot, he stands by what he believes is right and would fight for it. When times grew hard, like the rest of the elder siblings, he also unselfishly shared material resources.

No, I didn't forget the eight one, because that is I – Belina. I am the one my mother was carrying in her womb as mentioned earlier in this story. She gave birth to me on February 19, 1958. As the pages unfold, my faith-life experiences give credence to what the Benedictine nun told my mother, “They are gifts from the Lord!” Yes, for what the Lord has done in my life, I humbly say, like my four brothers and four sisters, I am indeed a gift from God!

In gratitude to the Giver of Life and to the Pro-Life counselor of my mother, I am sharing the treasure of this precious life.

SECOND BIRTHDAYS

“God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him” (Gen.1: 27)

Msgr. Jingco, my parish priest once said, *“My real birthday is on the day I was baptized as a Roman Catholic. I want to celebrate the day I became heir to God’s kingdom.”*

That’s amazing! Very few people would think that way. I myself haven’t thought of celebrating my baptismal day.

My godfather, Rev. Fr. Jose Guiao and godmother, Lourdes Lugue had a picture taken on my baptismal day, March 8, 1958. I must be blessed, for I am the only one in the family with such a picture. And it must have been a grace-filled celebration. The old black and white picture shows a cute little girl surrounded by loving family members. My mother, Sister Delia and brother Fortunato are in the picture. The midwife is there, too. How wonderful it is to have a photograph of my birthday in God’s kingdom.

Speaking of God’s kingdom, I imagine it as a place abounding with life and love. I like to think of it as a manifestation of who God is. If God is Life, then His kingdom is full of life. It is where every tiny cell finds its meaning in the web of life. And if God is Love, His Kingdom is full of love. It is where we give love and receive love. And if I were to think of it that way, my being an heiress to His kingdom means that I become truly alive, loving and lovable. God, having created us in His image and likeness, has so designed it that we become like Him. Sometimes, we find this foundational principle in a deep theological sense. But when we look at it in terms of day-to-day relational attitudes, it becomes simple and down to earth. And if we try to live each day by being alive, enthusiastic, energetic and loving, then we are not far from living in the image and likeness of God, who is LIFE and LOVE. A simple

smile to greet each person in the morning and a warm 'hello' or 'good morning' is a good starter each day. An enthusiasm to go an extra mile would go a long way. A loving gesture extended to each person every time there is an opportunity to do it has a multiplying effect.

In my 45 years, I haven't imagined how I have made tricycle drivers feel important by my mere sweet smile and good morning greeting every time I pass by them in the morning on my way to church. I also find that I can put love in simple gestures like picking up grocery items fallen from the racks, listening to life stories of our househelps and sharing a little of what I have with those who have less in life.

It doesn't cost much to be a real Christian. All it takes is to have the will to do it. Everything else becomes spontaneous. And this is the best way to celebrate birthdays. It is making real God's kingdom...everyday!

THE BARBER AND THE HOUSEKEEPER

*“...God then replied ... ‘Since you have not asked for riches, treasures and glory, nor for the life of those who hate you, nor even for a long life for yourself, but have asked for wisdom and knowledge...wisdom and knowledge are given you.’”
(2Chronicles 1:10-12a)*

My father hardly finished Grade Two! Well, his mother was overprotective of him. Father was very sickly at the time he was going to school. He developed boils all over his body. Grandmother went to a well-known quack doctor, who minus anesthesia did all sorts of “fountain-like lesions” on the arm and leg of my father so that the abscess could flow out naturally. My father narrated to me how the quack doctor tied his arm and leg, and then lighted a tobacco and when it was burning right enough, he pressed it hard on the infected areas. Naturally, my father groaned in pain. Then the wounds were covered with pieces of clean white cloth taken from worn-out shirts. In a few days, lo and behold, the fountain of pus would emit from the abscess! My father would then be relieved of the pain. (To this day he lives with those scars.) Some days later, he would suffer from another kind of sickness similar to meningitis. Grandmother took pity of him and said that he would rather have my father around the house rather than lose him. And so, he ordered him to stop going to school.

Grandmother though unschooled was an educated woman. My father fondly recalls how she read volumes and volumes of books. Father never really understood how my grandmother learned to read, as she was unschooled. Father himself took a good liking to reading. He devoured the books he inherited from grandmother. Way back in his early schooldays, he already discovered his gift of intelligence. He proudly told me that at the start of

school year, his teacher would give him and his classmates books to study for the entire school year. But a few months later, my father would ask for more from his teacher as he had already finished reading the books. One time, the teacher either jokingly or seriously told him, “Go home now, Hilario, I have nothing more to teach you!”

Father had special gifts. God gave him wisdom and eloquence in speech. But when he grew old enough to realize having such gifts, he resented grandmother’s decision for him to stop going to school. He said that he would have gone a long way...like being a lawyer (he never lost in any debate on matters of faith!), or being a priest (he mastered Scriptures...memorizing the book, chapter and verse number!). Instead, he ended up with razors and scissors. He became a barber by profession.

Father met mother during the outbreak of World War II. His family evacuated in my mother’s place because they were their nearest kin. At that time my mother just came from the Benedictine convent where she was working. A few years back, my maternal grandmother thought it was wise for girls to finish only the elementary level. My maternal grandfather agreed in the belief that women should be home-keepers as soon as they got married. And to my mother’s dismay, she was asked to quit when she was in first year high school. The Benedictine nun who witnessed my mother’s virtues and academic excellence when she was studying requested her to work at the convent. Thus, my mother obliged. She devoted much of her time to prayer as she was assigned to prepare the altar for the daily celebration of the Holy Eucharist. She also warmly received the ‘internas’ of the convent. She had been enjoying her work when the war broke. She had to leave the convent and go home. It was during this time that father took refuge in mother’s house. Sooner than later, both thought that the future was bleak and they found

consolation with each other. They developed a liking for each other and so they decided to get married. Thus the barber and the home-keeper started their own family. Both had no material riches and treasures. They had only the hand of God. And God gave them real treasures – wisdom and fortitude to “keep going even when the going gets rough”!

ELDA'S SACRIFICE

"She is more precious than corals, and none of your choice possessions can compare with her." (Proverbs 3:15)

Elfleda or Elda as she is fondly called is the second to the eldest in our family. At the time she graduated from elementary, my mother gave birth, one after the other with less than two years spacing each from the seventh to the ninth child. Life was extra difficult during those years. Delia, our eldest managed to get through her studies through a scholarship. My mother needed to help my father in earning a living by selling native snacks. But since no one could take care of us (7th, 8th and 9th) while father and mother were working, Elda had to stop going to school.

While looking after us, she worked as a laundry girl. She said that the three of us – Rosemarie, Cleofas and I were docile enough to be left on a big laundry basin. She would entertain us with the sepal of a 'makopa' fruit by letting it twirl around us. We were delighted with that simple natural 'plaything'. Later, whenever I would see a makopa, I would be reminded of the simplicity of our needs. I never had a Barbie doll, or a rattle, nor did I enjoy the comfort of a stroller. But my sister kept us all contented with the whirl and twirl of the makopa.

Elda stopped going to school for six long years. That means she never resumed schooling until our youngest was ready to go to school. At that time, her peers were already in third Year College. It must be very embarrassing on her part to resume schooling and stay at first year high school level. At 18, she was to be the oldest and tallest in her class. But she didn't mind it. She was just determined to go back to school and earn an education. What a woman! She finished an education course and later became a good educator.

I will never forget Elda's sacrifice for the family. And through the succeeding decades of years, she continued giving herself to us and to her own family. She had borne crosses in her lifetime. But she never gave up. For more than ten years now, she had been taking care of her husband who became paralyzed after a heart attack. At present, she is patiently taking care of her 4 grandchildren. I could narrate of a lot of tales about her sacrifices. But just to think solely of the sacrifice she did for me already merits my lifetime gratitude to this woman who taught me about God's love by her self-sacrificing deeds.

She is indeed "more precious than corals and none of my choice possessions can compare with her"!

THE SHEPHERD CLAD IN BENEDICTINE HABIT

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.” (Psalm 23:1)

When there are nine children and two adults in the family with hardly some food to satisfy everyone, school education would be a secondary or tertiary concern. And when one is number eight in the family, a chance for this person to go to school is very slim. Yet God has always surprises. Beyond human understanding, there is a divine power manifested even in a tiny corner of the earth, a mighty hand working small miracles in the life of an insignificant family.

I may be biased towards Benedictines but I can't help it. You see, the Benedictine nuns admitted all nine of us as 'working students' in a parochial school run by them, which is the St. Mary's Academy in Bacolor, Pampanga. It may sound unrealistic and unthinkable how one at the age of six upon entry in pre-school would work to have a free education. At six, I didn't know much about hard work. Well, that's again Divine Providence at work! It was also due to the benevolence of the Benedictines why like my brothers and sisters, I was admitted a 'working student'.

I would like to think of the discipline of work that Benedictines inculcated in my young mind as they allowed me to do something to earn my education. What could a six-year old pupil do? I remember that at the end of class, my teacher, Miss Romero would let me stay behind. My classmates would all be out of the room to either play or go home right away. Oh how I hungered to play and to make friends! But I had to stay behind and remain faithful to my 'work'. My teacher taught me how to sweep the floor. That's all I did during pre-school. And to my delight, at the end of the school year, I received a "Best in Work Education" medal!

When I was in Grade One, I ran errands for my teacher, Mrs. Pineda. I would fetch drinking water from the water pump nearby. At the end of my classes, I would clean our classroom. And so this went on in my Grade Two and Grade Three years. When I was in Grade Four, I already learned to wax the wide antique floors of our school. Then, when I was strong enough in my Intermediary school years, I could scrub the floor with a coconut husk and turned the floor so shiny.

During all these years, Sr. Remedios Noche, O.S.B. lovingly took care of me. She treated me kindly and sometimes brought me to places that she visited.

I was also given due academic recognition. At the end of each school year, I would either bring home a medal for “Best in Conduct” or “Best in Religion” or “Academic Excellence”.

I was transferred to a Benedictine school in San Fernando when I was in First Year High school, but due to unavoidable circumstances, I was brought back to St. Mary’s the following school year. As a little grown-up girl now, I was given higher responsibilities. Sr. Diethilde, O.S.B., the nun assigned in the canteen would ask me to assist her during recess when I would serve the schoolboys and girls buying snacks. In return, I had a free merienda. In the afternoon after my classes, I would help in the Library. And this went on till I graduated from High School. During graduation day, as the class Valedictorian I was the most fulfilled student. My life had been shaped by the Benedictine motto: ORA ET LABORA (Pray and Work) and U.I.O.G.D. (That in All Things God May be Glorified). All the important values were molded in my person: God-fearing, prayerful, honest, hardworking and studious. God’s hand was at work in me throughout my life. He was there providing all the strength and knowledge I needed as a working student. The Lord is truly my shepherd and he came to me in the person of the Benedictines.

LEFTOVERS ARE NOT JUST FOR THE DOGGIES

*“...He who had gathered a large amount did not have too much, and he who gathered a small amount did not have too little. They so gathered that everyone had enough to eat.”
(Exodus 16:17b-18)*

Who says that leftovers are just for the doggies? Wait till you hear this story...

Mother continued to sell native snacks like ‘kakanin’ in St. Scholastica’s Academy, San Fernando. During recess periods, Delia, my eldest sister who was teaching in that school would help her. Adoracion, the 4th child in the family was privileged to study there as a working student when she was in high school also helped in selling.

My mother and sisters made also a special arrangement with the Benedictines. Adoracion was to gather all the leftover food during lunchtime. Scholasticans were usually well off and they brought delicious food for lunch. It was more than enough to satisfy their hunger and so they usually had leftovers. Adoracion lost no time to gather patiently albeit shyly these leftovers. No, the leftovers were not for a Doberman or Labrador or Bulldog or German shepherd or “Askal”. The leftover food was intended for us. It was to be our best ‘Lauriat’ and ‘Smorgasbord’ in the evening! Mother re-processed it. The rice would be smashed and fried. Then we would have our ‘Chinese fried rice’ – complete with skins of longaniza, scraps of luncheon meat and dashes of table salt. There would be sidings of fried chicken ‘bones’ and pork chop’s remaining ribs! Boy, that was indeed a treat and a feast to me! It was a different treat from the usual ‘tinolang tugak’ (frogs) and ‘tinolang’ snails.

One day, a certain mishap happened. On her way home to Bacolor one afternoon, Adoracion boarded a jeepney. She was carrying the leftover food, which was neatly packed in banana leaves. Adoracion was the clumsy kind of person who always dropped and broke things. She securely kept the food at her breast. But accidents, as the oldies say, happen inevitably. One passenger carelessly hit my sister and down fell the leftover food and was scattered on the floor of the jeepney. My sister sobbed loudly. The other passenger was disturbed and asked my sister why she was so grieved by the mishap. To that Adoracion replied, in between sobs, "...Oh. Ah...Uh...uhh. Our dogs don't have anything to eat anymore for tonight!" Of course she meant a family of human beings – THE SINGIAN FAMILY! That night there was no smorgasbord or lauriat.

Today when asked what lesson I learned from that story, I simply put my two hands forward, palms facing the ground, open my mouth and say, "Aw...aw...bow wow wow". It is an unforgettable humorous part of my life. It took about 40 years before I shared that incident with my friends without being embarrassed about it! And what is nice about that is that I could also tell this joke to my husband, "Maybe, I ate a portion of the leftovers of your sisters who were studying in St. Scholastica at that time, and that's why we became close!"

But seriously thinking now, I would like to look at those times as God's ways of repeating the miracle of the 'Multiplication of the Loaves'. "...*And they all ate, and everyone had enough; then the disciples gathered up the leftovers, filling twelve baskets.*" (Matthew 14:20) Now I understand more the wisdom on 'leftovers'. I will never underestimate the value of leftovers. Nor will I ever underestimate God's Providence!

LOVING TOUCHES – MORE THAN SOLAR ENERGY

“Yet it is you who brought me out of the womb and kept me safe at my mother’s breast. I have been yours since I was born; you are my God from my mother’s womb.”

(Psalm 22:10-11)

I inherited father’s poor health. My sisters used to tease me that I was almost undependable in household chores. If I washed even just a handkerchief, I would surely get sick the next day. Oh no, I am not exaggerating! One time this really happened. And I also did suffer from monthly fevers. The fever came in time with my monthly visits. During these sick days, I felt the most loving touches of my family. Well, I couldn’t expect much when I had no fever. I have four more brothers and four more sisters that have to be looked after also! But yes, I felt special during sick days. And maybe God allowed me to be sick often because He wanted me to feel the love of my family in many ways.

Father was almost a nervous wreck when one of us got sick. He would separate the plates, spoon and fork of the sick person. Later I would understand why. He was very prudent that no one gets contaminated because there was no money to pay for the doctor’s fee and the medicines. Sometimes my father would take the role of a ‘diagnostic physician’ and would prescribe medicines. He also read medical books! I used to wonder how he does this trade. He gets my pulse rate and suddenly smilingly utters, “You have no more fever”. Or at times, his face turned anxious when the fever would not leave. We were usual clients of the free health center. When we were not strong enough to be brought to the center, a doctor came in to diagnose and would not charge anything. Mother literally begged from benefactors during

these times. Medicines were not affordable. My parents regarded all these human provisions as Divine Providence at work. Later, I came to realize that faith and love had so much to do with healing.

Being sick gave me much advantage. Mother tenderly gave me a sponge bath. Father's mother was usually around to take turns with mother. I couldn't forget her loving touches. She would pat my face and say, "Oh my granddaughter", with tears welling from her eyes. I guess those were the times that my fever soared high. And I imagined how my loving grandmother took care of my father in his younger days when he was also sickly like me.

I was usually fed soft rice and a simple viand that was especially cooked for me. I would be happy with 'tinolang tugak' or frogs cooked with papaya and lots of green leaves. We had a backyard where papaya and vegetables grew. Father saw to it that we feasted on vegetables and soup.

A few days after the fever had left me, father and mother would do the ritual preparations for my bathing. Father would prepare water in a large basin and put it under the sun for warming. At 10 in the morning, the water should be ready and mixed with sap of boiled herbs. Mother gave me a hurried bath. Father always got ready with my hot soup, which I sipped as soon as I had my bath.

My Realization:

Why did my parents have to put the water under the sun? Maybe, they believed in the healing power of solar energy. But to me, the healing is more than the solar energy. It is the loving touches of people that hastened my recovery. It is the sacrifice of my parents and their faith in God that healed me.

THE STORY OF THE NIPA HUT

*"I am the Lord... I will rescue you by my outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and you shall have me as your God."
(Exodus 6:6-7a)*

I was born in San Vicente, Bacolor, Pampanga. My memory is filled with happy childhood days in that small hut. It stood at my maternal ancestors' lot and was situated at the back of my grandmother's house. The hut was made of bamboo and nipa. The stairway leading to the main house was made of nicely cut round bamboo. The stairs would immediately lead to the 'kusina', which was used by my three elder sisters to lay their mats when they go to sleep at night. Parallel to it was the 'kilub' or inner room, which the four younger siblings, including me used to spread our big mat when we went to sleep. Perpendicular to it was the 'silid', which was comfortable enough for my father. My mother slept between the young girls and young boys. She was our 'divider'. Cleofas slept by her right side. Fortunato slept next to Cleofas. I slept by her left side. Rosemarie slept next to me. At night, not even a thief would dare to intrude, as he would be hanged by the strings of our mosquito nets, whose ties were carefully joined together.

Stories had been told that this house where I grew withstood the tests of three transfers from one place to another. Definitely, we were mere squatters. It must have been built sturdily, with the help of my father's father and brother, who were both carpenters. But sooner than later, I realized how it had depreciated through the years. During rainy days, I could hardly contain the shouts of my father from the rooftop. It was dripping! Father would shout from the top of his voice to ask the help of my brothers in order to make patches to cover the holes of the roof. Oh those stormy weathers were very

traumatic for me! Our house swayed due to gusty strong winds aggravated by the swaying of the bamboo trees that towered just behind our small hut. Our floor would get soak with the rain. There were hardly any protective windows. And I was very scared of the rising water at the riverbanks at the back of our house. But God had his own way of consoling me then. When the weather was stormy, I had a feast of oatmeal donated by Sr. Michaelis, O.S.B. and the Benedictine community. The milk or Klim that was donated by the USAID added flavor to it. Also, the hot rice porridge always tasted so good.

I couldn't imagine how I could accept guests or visitors in that small nipa hut. It didn't have a space for such gatherings. Cooking and eating were done downstairs. There was no need of any flooring downstairs. We had close contact with nature. We could walk barefooted, in-touch with mother earth! Later in life, I learned that this is a healthy way to receive energy from nature.

While living in that nipa hut, I had my first crush. Within its walls, I also dreamed dreams. No matter how tiny this place was, I just felt secure in it. I have fond memories of playing with my brother, Cleofas. I have fond memories of my shared meals with Rosemarie. Many times we ate from a single plate and divided the food into two equal parts. When I thought that I wanted more than my portion, I would seemingly focus her attention to a faraway object and then took that opportunity to grab a little from her portion of food. Sometimes, without me being aware of her antics, she got even with me.

One day, all these fond memories would be buried in oblivion. We needed to vacate the lot and find a place for our nipa hut. My family was totally unprepared and Delia had to do something. She needed to find a place for us. More prayers were said to implore divine help. And God's final verdict was for us to leave the place...to leave all my childhood memories...to leave

friends, neighbors and the community. I was devastated! And so were my sisters, brothers and parents. That was October 5, 1975. It was the day we moved to Pilar Village, San Fernando. My sister acquired a house and lot through a low-cost housing loan from the Social Security System. That meant much belt-tightening in order to set aside –P-120.00 for the monthly amortization.

It took almost 20 years for me to totally understand why God took us away from Bacolor. In the morning of October 1, 1995, the mudflows and lahar that buried Bacolor woke up my senses. Then and only then did I realize how God carefully planned my family's 'exodus' in 1975 in order to spare us from the perils of lahar wrought by the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo. For how could that small hut ever survive the terrors of mudflows and lahars?

LOVE CONSISTS OF APPLES...

“Yes, God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him may not die but may have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

Nowadays, apples are mostly everywhere. Sometimes, they’re up for sale – a dozen for one hundred pesos! Gone are the days when apples, the real delicious ones, were rare and reserved only for those who could afford the price. Those who do not belong to my generation could hardly understand.

Back in childhood, how I longed to eat an apple! My parents couldn’t afford to buy one even if I got sick. Maybe that’s why I was sickly. As the saying goes, “An apple a day keeps the doctor away”. But kidding aside, I was really deprived of apples.

My sister Rosemarie, being so loving and self-sacrificing, risked a lot to give me the best and most delicious apples when she had a chance to work at the then Clark Air Base (CAB). As known to many, CAB used to be a military base of the United States that was situated in Angeles City. Having a chance to work at the base was indeed a rare opportunity. It offered the best compensation and wonderful amenities. It gave its Filipino employees the chance to buy imported food as long as they consumed it inside the base. My sister, being employed at Clark, naturally had a chance to buy apples. But she had one big, big problem. She wanted me to enjoy the apples she was enjoying. But if she were caught sneaking an apple out of the base, she would lose her job. But my sister’s love for me is worth more than her job. She risked a lot in the many times she brought home an apple for me. How she did it, I don’t know!

Lately when I told my sister how I appreciate her love for me and brought her memory to CAB, she struck her breast with a “Mea Culpa” and said,

“What if I had lost my job for an apple? But then, that was what made apples sweet!”

The love of my sister taught me a lot about truly loving, which is the willingness to take risk. I cannot help but think now of the greatest love of all when the CREATOR OF THE UNIVERSE, MY GOD risked HIS ONLY SON for my salvation.

CHAPTER II

THE FERTILIZER: VALUES

MOTHER SUPERIOR'S DISCIPLINE

*“The discipline of the Lord, my son, disdain not; spurn not his reproof;
For whom the Lord loves he reproves, and he chastises the son he favors.”
(Proverbs 3:11-12)*

My sister, Delia figured prominently in my life. She was named “Mother Superior”; a title befitting one who is highly respectable. “Mother Superior’s” discipline is characterized by strict adherence to her rules. It consisted of being organized with time management, being responsible and following all her instructions to the letter. She posted on the walls of our nipa hut our schedules.

I remember my typical day in summer:

- 6:00 a.m. – Wake up time
- 6:00-6:30 am – Clean oneself and go to church
- 6:30-7:30 am – Attend daily Holy Mass (walking to and from the church consumes 30 minutes)
- 7:30-8:00 am – Breakfast
- 8:00-9:00 am – Individual work (I was assigned to washing the plates.)
- 9:00-12:00 nn – Family chores or School (I had the responsibility to assist in school as a working student)
- 12:00-1:00 p.m. – Lunch
- 1:00-3:00 p.m. – Siesta (I hated it most!)
- 3:00-4:00 p.m. – Free time
- 4:30-5:30 p.m. – Flores de Mayo in May
- 6:00 p.m. – Angelus and Family Prayer
- 6:30-7:30 p.m. – Supper and individual chores
- 9:00 p.m. – Bedtime

When I look back at this highly organized time management, I cannot help but quietly thank my sister for the discipline she instilled in my young nature. I would carry this discipline from then on. When I was in a corporate world and became a supervisor, this childhood training worked very well in task prioritization. My superiors admired me for my time management and organization.

God has prepared me from childhood through the discipline of “Mother Superior”. I learned to put God as a priority. Rather, God blessed my time management by giving me the grace of obedience to his representative, my sister. I salute “Mother Superior”. And I bow to God, my TIME MANAGER!

DIVISION OF LABOR

"I have considered the task, which God has appointed for men to be busied about. He has made everything appropriate to its time; and has put the timeless into their hearts....

I recognized that there is nothing better than to be glad and to do well during life."

"Ecclesiastes 3:11a, 12)

One thing I learned from a big struggling family is the beauty of community and the benefits of helping one another. We did not have the luxury of helpers in the house. It was unimaginable to have one. And so, to have things done in an effective way, my sister Delia organized our chores and termed it "Division of Labor". She used administrative skills and management techniques. The task assigned depends on one's capability, talent or skill and I believe there was no favoritism. I happened to be the frail child and the youngest among the girls, and so I had an advantage. Here is the division of labor.

1st – Delia – Breadwinner

2nd – Elda - Laundrywoman

3rd – Romeo – Janitor (Yard Cleaner whenever he goes home)

4th – Adoracion – Cook

5th – Hilario, Jr. – Seminarian (excused! – he stayed in the seminary most of the times)

6th – Fortunato – Woodcutter for our Fuel

7th – Rosemarie – Cinderella (she cleaned the cinders, pots, etc.)

8th – Belina – Dishwasher

9th – Cleofas – Shoe Cleaner

It was a great community life! Yet, we were never spared of evasion attempts when laziness hit us. I remember fondly how I tried to evade my chores in the evening. If I didn't feel like washing the dishes, I would retire

early to bed and skip dinner. But I was treated gently and reminded to be fair and just. After all, what are plates to wash compared to cinders, pots, etc. to scrub?

Whenever I go back to those experiences, I feel grateful that at an early age, I was taught the value and dignity of work. But more than ever, now that I am doing pastoral work, I thank God that He gave me a share in the ‘church work’. In my present ministry, I appreciate greatly the contribution of those who carried the mission of Jesus, from the Apostles to the First Christians, the martyrs, saints, our spiritual fathers and our present leaders of the church. Surely, Jesus is the wisest executive director, who ‘divided the labor’ among His followers in a span of more than 2,000 years now. He gave us a share, depending on our capacity, gifts and talents. And He plays fair.

As in my childhood days, I sometimes evaded my duty. But God always treated me gently and reminded me to do my best in my “small contribution”. The Church is a great community indeed, if each one of us will do our share in the “Division of Labor”.

THE DAILY VISITS

*“One thing I ask of the Lord; this I seek;
To dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life,
That I may gaze on the loveliness of the Lord and contemplate his temple.”
(Psalm 27:4)*

St. Mary’s Academy, the school that I went to in my Elementary and High School years, had the distinct features of a parochial school. It was adjacent to the parish church of Bacolor, the San Guillermo Parish Church. The choir loft of the church adjoined it to the Clausura or cloistered room of the Benedictine nuns who run the school. Only the nuns had the privilege to enter the church without one noticing them. It seemed to be their hideout. The backdoor of the Clausura led to the choir loft and the nuns got to church by going down the stairs of the choir loft. Beneath that stairs, stood the life-size image of Mama Mary. A few meters away from the pedestal of Mama Mary is a confessional box. In here I received absolutions from my many childhood sins. Some more meters away led to the main part of the church. A little forward was the approach to the communion rail. A few steps upward led to the Altar table. Behind it was the Tabernacle that housed the Blessed Sacrament.

A side door of the church led to the Home Economics building of our parochial school. Sometimes, we took this as a short way to get to church from school when we had our First Friday masses or Lenten activities like Stations of the Cross, retreats, etc.

I could not remember a single day when I went to school without making my visits to the Blessed Sacrament and Mama Mary. I usually recited this old-time classical prayer:

“My dear Jesus, may I do all for the love of Thee,
Jesus come to me;

Jesus I love Thee”

Then turning to Mama Mary, I used to whisper:

“O Mary, by Thy Holy and Immaculate Conception
Keep my body pure and my soul holy”.

Bound home after school, I would pass by again for a visit. My classmate Gizelle Laxamana used to wait for me. Gizelle’s house in Bacolor was about 5 houses away from our house. She wanted to take the 15-minute walk back home with me. She patiently waited for me after I did my school assignment as a working student. I didn’t realize the great deal of patience she bore during those times of waiting until we met after more than 30 years.

Gizelle and I met again in Madapdap Resettlement in Mabalacat where she resettled with her family after their house in Bacolor was buried by lahar. I was facilitating a seminar about Basic Ecclesial Communities in their parish. Gizelle happened to be the Vice-President of the Parish Pastoral Council. She heard me share about a portion of my faith life experiences – how the Lord has been testing me and how the Lord has been working in my life and preserving me. Gizelle could hardly wait for me to finish and she raised her hand to signal that she wanted to say something. So I gave her the floor.

Gizelle:

“I stood up to testify to what Belina said. Yes, she is my childhood friend and classmate. I witnessed her daily devotions and prayerful life. Look at her knees; they are callous as a result of the length of her prayers. Belle, pardon me for keeping this from you for a long time. When we were small and I used to wait for you so we could walk home together, it was with much irritation that I waited for you when we made our visits. I usually said my prayers hurriedly so I could go home right away. But you were so engrossed in your

prayers that you seemed to be oblivious of time. How I murmured against the length of your prayers. But now, I realize that those times were real good times. It is because of your prayerfulness that God has worked tremendously in your life. I admire you.”

As I reflected on Gizelle’s confession, I had a deep sense of gratitude to God. I felt special in His eyes. By this time I already learned that when one feels a desire to pray, it is actually God acting on that person. In other words, it is God who takes the initiative in prayer. And looking back, it came to my mind and heart that those long hours of praying to God were actually anointed times and that God called me very often for conversations. I really felt special. Things began to fall in their proper places. I nodded gently my head and said, “Thank you Lord, that even when I was yet a child, You have already chosen me.”

BEING...RATHER THAN DOING AND HAVING

*“What is man that you should be mindful of him?
Or the son of man that you should care for him?
You have made him little less than the angels and crowned him with glory and
honor. You have given him rule over the works of your hands, putting all things
under his feet.”
(Psalm 8:5-7)*

Do you know why we are called human beings and not human doings and human having? Because our dignity does not rest on what we could do neither on what we have nor on our capacity to acquire; rather, it rests on the basic truth that God resides in our core, which is the level of human being.

Maybe, like me, you have unforgettable experiences that adulterated this understanding of the dignity of the human person. Many people treat with more respect those who have more in life. Many people admire more those who are able to do more in life. And those who **have** less in life and are able to **do** less have very low self-esteem. I am not exempted from these people.

I now recall some painful childhood experiences. When I was transferred to another Benedictine school during my First Year High School, the school that I went to had most of its students in the upper echelon of society. Two teachers embarrassed me. And I did not feel the acceptance of most of my new classmates. I was never invited in any of the birthday celebrations of my classmates. From then on, I would always feel as a second-class student. And I asked myself, “Don’t I deserve such discriminating treatment considering that I don’t look like one who should gain their respect?” I developed self-pity for my external appearance. I had only one uniform and it looked so old, faded and worn-out. It is as if it had been passed on from my elder sister. To make it last from Monday to Friday, my mother would wash it with starch. Then to

add to my self-pity, a daily allowance was not affordable by my parents. I hardly ate during recess. And during lunchtime, I didn't like to show the viand my mother packed for me. Lunch usually consisted of rice, one egg and one tomato. Other times, I would find a small slice of canned meat loaf. I couldn't remember ever having a sumptuous meal.

I guess some teachers and classmates judged me from my peripherals or at the level of 'having' and 'doing'. Thus I suffered from very low self-esteem. Even with my earlier history of academic excellence, I received poor grades during that school year. Then by Divine Providence, I was transferred back to my former school, St. Mary's Academy. And some good teachers developed me. They believed in my sense of being. They taught me not just algebraic expressions, theorems, hypotheses but also to believe in myself. I was valued at my core. And to my surprise, I regained self-confidence and eventually graduated on top of my class.

My Realization:

God touches our being at our core where we are all equals. In this truth lies our dignity. I am glad that there were persons who loved me and valued me at my core. It gave me a strong conviction that each person has this gift of self that is capable of being developed once it is touched by love.

Have you tried to touch a person with love and value him at the core and not because of the peripherals?

EVEN WITHOUT A SINGLE PENNY

*“Better a poor man who walks in his integrity
than he who is crooked in his ways and rich.”
(Proverbs 19:1)*

One of the values that my father shaped in me is Honesty. He told me that even if I were so hungry; I should not get what is not mine to satisfy the hunger. He also taught me about justice and retribution, that is, if one has stolen something, he should return what he has stolen. He even went further by telling me that when I grew up and had the chance to work, I should be fair and just. If I receive a full compensation, I should really work for it. In other words, I shall render to my employer the commensurate services. And he went on to tell me that should I get a chance to land a job that involves money, I should never be tempted to get what is not mine.

When I was a small girl and not attending school yet, I had my younger brother Cleofas as my playmate. We were contented playing with make-believe home making. Our well-to-do neighbor had an only child, Edwin. He was well protected and provided for. Not everyone had the opportunity to play with him. I considered it my privilege to be trusted by his dad. He would call for my brother and me to play with his son, Edwin, right in the master’s bedroom. I vividly recall that at times I would find coins left on the table. To me, these coins mattered a lot because I was so deprived in childhood of money. But I was always reminded of the teachings of my father about honesty. As a child, I was spared from stealing what is not mine. And I thank God for that grace! I owe a lot to my parents’ admonitions. Later in life, this would be my foundational principle on how to cope with the complexities of the structure of sin in the system of governance.

OF LIES AND PRETENSES

“Folly is close to the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him.” (Proverbs 22:15)

At one point in my life, I despised living in a nipa hut. Why? It did not give me the chance to receive visitors. I could never be proud of it to my classmates or friends.

This incident happened at a stage of my life when lying became an issue. I was in Grade Four. I wanted to make friends with Gloria and June. Gloria was the daughter of one of our faculty members and she lived in a decent house. June was a beautiful girl who lived in a big beautiful house. I had been to their houses and I envied them. Gloria and June were in Grade Five. We became close because in one school year, we were integrated in one class. I wanted to keep the ties together even if we were no longer integrated in one class. And I admired them because of their external appearance. They wore neat and new uniforms. They were famous in class and were among the better students. And so, I wanted to be their equal. I wanted to be regarded as their friend.

One day, I told them many stories. I told them that our house is a two-story-building and that it is made of concrete and wood. I concocted several stories that they believed. And so, to my surprise, they told me that they wanted to visit ‘our house’. What two-story building shall I show them? Ah...I got an idea. The house that I was telling them was my aunt’s house, which was near Edwin’s house. I will bring them to my aunt’s house. Problem solved! I brought Gloria and June to ‘our house’.

To my greater surprise the following day, Gloria and June tried to avoid me. They didn't like to talk to me nor did they want to even look at me. They discovered my lies and pretenses. What a shame I felt! It was one of the sins I committed as a child that I could not forget. I felt so small. I longed for their forgiveness.

I must have underestimated true friendship...that it does not look on what one can give; rather, it is a relationship that is built on trust. That taught me a hard lesson about friendship.

Today, I have real true friends whom I treasure. They stood by me in good times and in bad times. I also do the same to them. I have rich and poor friends alike. I have educated and unschooled friends. I learned so much about friendship as I revealed more about my core. The more I revealed to them who I am, the more open friends become to me. We complement one another. There is mutuality of trust. And today, I have a very special friend, JESUS, who stands by my side, understands me and accepts me despite my perennial lies and pretenses.

SERMON AT THE BARBER SHOP

*“When I was my father’s child, frail, yet the darling of my mother,
He taught me, and said to me:
Let your heart hold fast my words: keep my commands that you may live!
Get wisdom, get understanding! Do not forget or turn aside from the words I
utter.” (Proverbs 4:3-5)*

The barbershop was my father’s synagogue. The Bible is the whole content of my father’s sermon, which was eloquently shared with clients in a makeshift barbershop under the front wing of our nipa hut. He had a wooden chair, a mirror and all the needed paraphernalia to cut hair. I remember how he would take time preaching the Word of God to his clients. Some on hearing him accepted it with joy. They would go back for a haircut, although it took more time than the ordinary because of the “value-added services” such as listening to God’s message. Others, on hearing him were simply giving him one ear then the same message went out of the other ear. These were the ones who really just couldn’t give up the best barber in town. They stayed, but perhaps did not try to live the message of the gospel. Not a few people hanged out at the barbershop just to exchange ideas with my father. The parable of the “Sower and the Seed” comes into reality. It goes... “A farmer went out to sow the seed. And as he sowed, some of the grain fell along the way was trodden on and the birds of the sky ate it up. Some fell on rocky ground, and no sooner had it come up than it withered because it had no water. Some fell on thorns, grew up with the seed and choked it. But some fell on good soil and grew, producing fruit – a hundred times as much.” (Luke 8:5-8a)

When my father was taken to the seminary to be one of two official barbers of the seminarians, he took that opportunity to evangelize the future priests.

Most of the seminarians listened intently to him. A lot of them have been ordained priests. But some were “called but not chosen”.

Sometimes I saw two or three gentlemen clad in white long sleeves with necktie and black pants visit father’s ‘synagogue’. They were very persistent and well adept in the Bible. I couldn’t figure out how my father communicated. The ‘defenders of Protestantism’ were English speaking and my father spoke ‘carabao English’. But this was what amazed me. Gifted with wisdom from the Holy Spirit, my father would defend the Catholic truths and doctrines with unequalled zeal and conviction. Nobody was ever successful in swaying my father from his faith! He always won in a debate.

What I won’t forget are the words of wisdom he imparted to us in our everyday life. Example is this classical sermon: “If you want to get the best insurance, don’t settle for anything less than the insurance of all insurance. It is insuring for eternal life. What is the amount of premium? It is the priceless value of living a life of clear and good conscience and connected fully to God. ‘If today you hear His voice, harden not your hearts.’ In other words, if you have fallen into sin, lose no time to reconcile back to God. Have a clean mind, clean speech and clean desire. Don’t wish evil upon anyone.”

My father developed my love for the Sacrament of Reconciliation. I often fall into sin, but I lose no time to reconcile back to God. With all my human frailties, I offend God many times through the hurts I caused my neighbor but my earthly father assured me of the love of my Heavenly FATHER for a repentant sinner.

MORE THAN MEDALS AND HONORS

*“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, on your own intelligence rely not;
In all your ways be mindful of him, and he will make straight your paths.
Be not wise in your own eyes, fear the Lord and turn away from evil.”(Proverbs
3:5-7)*

My parents had the joy of going up the stage several times at the end of each school year. When my brothers and sisters were altogether studying in St. Mary’s Academy, each one of us earned medals. It was God’s way of compensating what we lacked in material terms.

When I was studying, I was very conscious about grades, honors and medals. I thought that my worth was only as good as my accomplishments. In college, when I topped the Dean’s List in the whole campus, I thought that that was what I was valued for. When I graduated with highest honors in the College of Commerce, Major in Accounting, I thought that that assured me of the best future that I could ever imagine.

For a while, I was right. I never had any difficulty in looking for a job, especially when I passed the licensure examinations for accountants. I landed on a good job in San Miguel Corporation, San Fernando Brewery. I was one of the pioneers of the then largest brewery in Asia.

As I moved on with life, got married and gave birth to two sons, I carried this attitude about honors and medals. It was only with painful experiences that I awakened to the reality that there is more to life than medals and honors. I thought that I was more intelligent than others were. And so I expected that I would have children who would garner more medals than other children would. Well God taught me a lesson. My children hardly brought home medals for academic excellence. And you know what? My friends’ children brought home after each school year medals and medals for academic

excellence. I was very envious of their achievements. But coming to my senses, I thought, “Is that all the worth of my children?” Definitely no and I say that with a capital NO! I love my children even if they failed to live up to my expectations. I love them even if at times there’s a red mark or a line of 7’s on the report card or even if a lot of times I would be summoned to school for their misbehavior. Later, I was awarded “Outstanding Parent” for being very supportive of my children. I couldn’t recall any time that I was summoned when I did not appear in school. Whether it was good news or bad news, I was there. When my eldest son figured out in a quarrel with the school’s administrator who pushed my son to the wall and boxed my son, I mustered all my courage to confront this administrator.

I think of God like a real good mother who is there for me in good times and in bad times. Even when I turn to Him with a ‘red mark’ on my credentials (due to my sins), even when I failed in His expectations, even if I figured out in a quarrel or whatever, God will always stay with me. His love is constant. He doesn’t mind if I accomplished much or less. What matters most to Him is my whole being, which He created in His image.

I thank God that he is not concerned with medals. (He allowed my medals to be buried with lahar! We forgot to bring them along with us during our Bacolor exodus.)

CHAPTER III

THE SEED GERMINATES

GOD ANSWERS AT THE RIGHT TIME

“Yet Yahweh waits to give you grace, he rises to show you compassion. For Yahweh is a God of justice. Blessed are all who hope in him. ...you will weep no more. When you cry, he will listen; when he hears, he will answer.” (Isaiah 30:18-19)

I graduated on March 31, 1979 from the University of the Assumption. After a brief vacation, I went to Manila to take my review course in preparation for the licensure examination for accountants in October 1979. Right after taking the examinations, I tried my luck and applied in San Miguel Corporation at its head office in Ayala Avenue, Makati. I prayed hard for a job in San Miguel Corporation. It's everyone's desire to land in a prestigious company. The company boasts of its competitive compensation and benefits. Furthermore, it offers budding professionals the opportunity to build a career. I took the examination, passed it and was interviewed for a possible position in its Polo Brewery, Valenzuela. Since no job was offered to me at that time, I filed applications simultaneously in different companies, namely, Philippine National Bank, SGV and China Bank. China Bank was first to respond. It was to open its San Fernando Branch in two weeks. I just came in time! As soon as I got hired on December 1, 1979, PNB and SGV responded favorably but I finally opted to stay at China Bank. I was very satisfied with its compensation package and I didn't have to leave Pampanga in order to work. In July 1980, I heard that San Miguel Corporation was completing its staffing for its San Fernando Brewery. The site was just about a kilometer away from our house in Pilar Village and the constructions had been going on several years earlier, but I never heard about the plant. The news came in time with the release of the results of the board examinations that I took. I went to the Professional Regulations Commission to make verifications and I saw my name among the

list of passers. The newspapers confirmed my passing the board. I thanked God! Things were falling into proper places. I took a leave of absence from my work in China Bank and went to the Head Office of San Miguel Corporation in Ayala, Makati to follow up the application I filed months ago. That same day, Neng Pusung, the then HR assistant endorsed my papers to Ruben Sabado, the appointed Finance Officer for San Fernando Brewery. Ruben welcomed me and after looking at my credentials, he only asked me two personal questions. Being satisfied with my answers, he immediately stood up, extended his right hand and said, "Congratulations, you're hired!" I was enveloped with joy. All in a day's work, I was assured of a job! Moreover, it was a dream come true.

The following day, upon reporting back to my work at the bank, the manager was furious at me. He probably felt betrayed and he immediately asked me to file my resignation. That hurt most! I felt that he was quite harsh with me. With tears welling from my eyes, amidst the embraces and kisses of my colleagues, I bade them goodbye.

As I was yet to undergo physical examinations, I prayed very hard for favorable results. I turned once again to the Lord and pleaded for His providence. I went to the Carmelite Monastery in Angeles City and made the nine-hour novena to the Infant Jesus of Prague. I always believed in the power of prayer. Finally, the results of the physical examination came in a week's time. I passed the standards.

August 1, 1980 is a day to remember. It's my first day in San Miguel Corporation. It's God's appointed time to start writing new stories in a new chapter of my life. God impressed on me His ways. He answers prayers at the right time. Later I learned that the job I got was the only remaining vacant position in Finance before the brewery was to start its operations. It was

actually filled up already but the applicant didn't conform to the company's training requirements in Manila. Well, the job was really intended for me. Truly, Divine Providence is at work.

LAYING THE PILLARS

*“Wealth or wages can make life sweet,
But better than either is finding a treasure.” (Sirach 40:17b)*

Ruben Sabado was my mentor during more than a decade of years in San Miguel. Like a fine artist, he laid out my career’s colors one after the other. He prepared a real good background for his masterpiece, looked at it with pride and gave it rewards in due time.

I rose from the ranks. This worked best for me. I started with the position of budget analyst. In 1980, I was not yet introduced to computers. There was no computer yet in San Fernando Brewery. My first task was to compute for the budget of San Fernando Brewery for 1981. I had no idea of how to do it. Soon, I was asked to attend a Budget Appreciation Session in order to understand the budgetary system of San Miguel. Ruben Sabado endorsed me to my immediate superior, Regina Nacpil or Deng. She gave me a 16-column worksheet, a calculator, a pencil and an eraser. Together, we interpreted the budget assumptions and other data. I followed closely the ‘what, why and how’ of the work. I was learning very fast. I began to master the positioning of my fingers on the calculator such that I could perform mathematical computations without glancing anymore on the calculator pad. Deng and I developed a good friendship.

Ruben seemed to be satisfied with my performance. He gave me different assignments as soon as there was an opening for a new one. When the brewery necessitated a plant auditor, he right away gave the position to me. Again, he mentored me on how to prepare audit working papers. He taught me audit procedures. The theories I learned in school were applied. Of course I needed to master the company’s policies and procedures for my reference.

Instinctively I learned how to spot weaknesses and violations of internal control. I got my fame to the hilt when I was able to determine the most probable cause of the million peso losses on bunker fuel at the brewery. Mr. Ricardo Elizagaque, the brewery manager, invited professionals to train me on Kepner-Tregoe analysis. I immediately employed the technique and it worked.

When the supervisory position for Physical Distribution Accounting was vacated, Ruben put me in. He also engineered the multi-skilled strategy in Finance. He usually considered me in job rotations such that I was able to master the total aspects of Finance. At one time he assigned me to head the Brewery Accounting.

Alongside my regular work, Ruben assigned me to extra-curricular activities that heightened my professionalism. He assigned me as a Quality Circle Leader and sent me to Manila for training. When the brewery applied for accreditation to international quality standards (ISO 9002), he sent me to train for Quality Systems Assessor. This opened new horizons for me. The Procedures and Work Instructions Manual of Finance had my signature in almost all its pages. Ruben exposed me to lots and lots of training. I attended the Dale Carnegie's Presentation Skills & Effective Communications Training, Stephen Covey's Seven Basic Habits, 5S, etc.

As Ruben moved up the corporate ladder, he endorsed me to my new superior, Ning-ning Alfonso. In the early 1990's, as a result of decentralization, I was moved to another position. It is at this time that I had the opportunity to handle the Profit and Loss Statement and Capital Projects of the entire North and Central Luzon Operations. I made management presentations and data analyses. Ning-Ning became my mentor. The work-relationship that I had with her brought forth a beautiful personal relationship.

It extended to our individual families. Ning-Ning was not just a mentor but a friend, counselor and angel of light.

All my personal efforts together with the support of my superiors earned me the “Model Supervisor Award”, maximum merit increases and Employee Suggestion System or ESS awards.

Ruben, Deng, Ning-Ning and my San Miguel colleagues were the human hands that God maneuvered to shape me for a bigger plan. God’s design only started in San Miguel. For who really gave me wisdom in my work? Above anyone else, I attribute it to the Holy Spirit. He guided me in everything that I did. He always inspired me to recite this prayer:

Come Holy Spirit, enlighten me,
Teach me what I do not know;
Show me what I cannot do,
Come to me with Thy seven-fold gifts.

My Realization:

Today, as I look back at that good part of my life, I realize that the pillars of foundation that were laid in San Miguel are being used by God in my present ministry in the archdiocese. I am able to employ my skills as an accountant, auditor, consultant, trainor, planner, system assessor, typist, dishwasher, cleaner...name it; God gives me the chance to do it in the ministry He prepared for me. More than the wealth or wages that I earned in San Miguel for almost 18 years is the treasure or ‘pearl’ that God allowed me to “buy at a great price”.

MY FRIEND...MY REAL LIFETIME ONE

“ ...They must be temperate, serious-minded, and self-controlled; likewise sound in the faith, loving, and steadfast. (Titus 2:2)

I met a special friend way back in college. I used to precede his name with “Kong”, a title addressed to an older brother. I met him through Grace, my best friend in high school. It happened this way...

Grace, Winnie, Chona and I were really, really close during our entire college years. We ate together, studied together and sometimes slept together. We looked forward to always being together. When somebody wanted to court one of us, all the rest would serve as bodyguards. We used to chide everyone, telling them how pitiful was the guy who wanted to court anyone of us. It was like courting four girls.

One time, in an important school function, the four of us were chosen as usherettes. Naturally, we had a group picture taken. Grace secured the picture and showed it to her boyfriend, Bong. It happened that Bong was with his longtime friend, Felino. Grace asked Felino or Nok (his pet name) to choose a girl he wanted to date. Nok chose the mestiza-type, Chona. And he was introduced to all of us. True to our blood compact, we all played bodyguards to Chona when Nok tried to befriend her.

I developed a special friendship with Kong Nok. He was nine years my senior. Kong Nok was very simple. He always carried a smiling face. He was very gentle, down-to-earth, kind, thoughtful, jolly and everything that is in a friend. He loved to bring us home from school. Whenever he paid a special visit to Chona, he always sought the permission of my mother to accompany him. We had a very pure friendship. We could talk anything under the sun.

When I was about to graduate from college, Nok asked two special favors from me that he wished I could do for him after my graduation, namely; 1) to drop the address “Kong” and; 2) to go out alone with him for a dinner. I made a promise! And I also told him that I chose him to be my partner in our graduation ball.

I will make the long story short. After serious prayer and nine-hour novena prayers at the Carmel Monastery, Nok and I considered seriously our relationship. We became lifetime real friends on the day we exchanged “I do’s”. That was November 27, 1982.

As I reflected on my relationship with Nok, in gratitude I bring my thoughts to Mama Mary who protected me all along. Yes, she listened to my childhood prayer, “Oh Mary by Thy holy and Immaculate Conception keep my body pure and my soul holy”. Mama Mary interceded to Jesus for me to preserve my purity for the man I was going to marry. To this day, I humbly recognize the power of intercession. And I was blessed to offer the best gift that a woman could give to her husband on the day of their wedding.

Nok blessed my life and continues to do so. I could never imagine my life without him. He embodies the traits that St. Paul admonished Titus to look in men ... *“sound in the faith, loving and steadfast”*. Nok is God’s best gift to me.

TWO J.A.'S AND LESSONS WE LEARNED FROM ONE ANOTHER

*“Everyone must give according to what he has inwardly decided;
not sadly, not grudgingly, for God loves a cheerful giver.
God can multiply his favors among you so that you may always have enough of
everything and even a surplus for good works...
He who supplies seed for the sower and bread for the eater will provide in
abundance;
he will multiply the seed you sow and increase your generous yield.
(2 Corinthians 9:7-8,10)*

My lifetime friendship with Nok bore us two J.A's. The older one is JASPER ANTHONY and the younger one is JOSEPH AUGUSTINE. Jasper or Jay Jay was born on August 9, 1983. I searched for a nice name that starts with 'J' in the book of names. I spotted Jasper. It means 'treasure-bringer'. Because he was to be my first-born, I imagined him as a treasure-bringer. But I had to give him also a Christian name, that of a popular saint. And so I chose St. Anthony. About six years later, on June 7, 1989, another son was born to us. My husband chose St. Joseph as the patron saint and I chose St. Augustine, a doctor of the church.

Both Jay-Jay and Joseph are true treasures to us. We taught them about love of God and neighbor, especially the poor or those who have less in life. They played with the children of our house helpers. In their childhood days, Nok and I exposed them to acts of charity and told them stories of my childhood years. During our years in abundance, I used to bring food inside the car, stop for a destitute and asked Jay-Jay to hand the food to the destitute.

I also expanded the horizons of my children regarding their blessedness, awakened their social consciousness and responsibility. When Joseph was to turn seven on June 7, 1996, I challenged him to spend it in a more meaningful way. I offered to him the idea of sharing his gifts with orphans, but cautioned

him about not receiving any gift in return. At first he resisted the idea. He asked, “Why?” I further explained to him that during the past 6 birthday celebrations, he received all the toys and things he wanted and that his guests were all privileged children. I told him about the plight of the poor children and how deprived they are. His heart melted and he agreed to bring the ‘Jollibee-packaged’ party to the orphans housed in Sta. Maria, Balibago. When the big day came, I was surprised to see the discipline of the kids. The social worker taking care of them prepared the kids. They were so well behaved and were very much delighted to see a mascot, watch a Muppet show and to share the food with Joseph. At the end of the party, the kids presented an action song to Joseph as their way of thanking him.

That night, on our way home, Joseph did not receive any material gift from the orphans but he received the best birthday gift. He said, “Mommy, this is the happiest birthday in my whole life!” I couldn’t fathom the inner joy of a seven-year old kid and I treasured everything in my heart.

The occasional exposures that I allowed my kids to experience bore fruit. Jay-Jay and Joseph grew to be very compassionate persons. “They grew in wisdom and strength.” There are many succeeding beautiful stories to narrate about their dealings with the ‘least, last and lost’, even in their young days. I love to share this one...

When Joseph was around eleven years old, Marie, his nanny observed him to be doing something unusual. Without my knowledge, Joseph regularly took a portion of meal from the kitchen, packed it, got a bottle of water and went out of the house. Days later, Marie found out that Joseph was regularly feeding an insane woman who took refuge at the small street perpendicular to ours. I was stunned when Marie revealed that to me. You see, even when I was regarded as charitable and gave sorts of ‘dole-outs’ to the poor, I had a

weakness- I was afraid of crazy people and I couldn't touch the beggars. For several days, I had already noticed the insane woman that Marie talked about. Many times my conscience would bother me. It dawned on me that this woman must be hungry and needed food or at least water to drink. I felt so much emotional pity for this woman and I would utter, "Lord, please help her". Maybe had I listened more, God would have shouted, "Hey, that's why you're there, I want you to feed her". But my overwhelming fear deadened my conscience. And when Marie told me about Joseph's marvelous deeds, I was shamed. How could my 11-year old boy do it and I couldn't? I summoned Joseph and asked him if he was not afraid of the woman. He candidly answered, "Why should I? She doesn't hurt anyone. In fact, I'm very angry with the young boys teasing her." I felt guilty all the more. Then I asked Jay-Jay, the older brother, "Jay-Jay, did you ever do something good for that insane woman?" Jay-Jay replied, "Of course, I have been buying her snacks".

The remarks of my children hit hard on me. I composed myself, put some of my clothes in a plastic bag, packed the newly cooked meal and got a bottle of water. I went out of the gate and looked for the woman. As I was approaching her, goose pimples were all over me. I tried to take hold of my fear while handing her the goodies. She extended her hand and gave me her sweetest smile and said, "Salamat, ate, maraming salamat". (*Thank you, sister, thank you very much.*) I offered to give her a bath. She refused and instead asked for money to pay for her fare.

From then on up to this writing, I have never seen that woman again. It is just as if God visited me and allowed me to conquer my fear. Somehow, I felt liberated from my fear of the insane. Truly, God works in wonderful ways. It was I who benefited much from the experience.

MY NAOMI

“...Wherever you go I will go, wherever you lodge I will lodge, your people shall be my people and your God my God (Ruth1:16)

I love to think of the real Naomi. And I love to tell her story and that of her daughter-in-law, Ruth over and over again in our conduct of Parish Renewal Experience Seminars (PREX). Naomi and Ruth are biblical figures in the Old Testament. They inspire the church on their love-faith relationship. Their story tells much about God’s fidelity and love that extends even to non-Jews.

I lovingly associate Mang Pining to Naomi. Mang Pining is my mother-in-law. A portion of her life is at the heart of my life testimony, which I share in the conduct of PREX seminars. Here it goes...

When I got married, Nok requested that we live with his mother in Mexico. I consented. Mang Pining was easy to love. She also loved me like her own true daughter. She lovingly accepted me, even with our big gap in socio-economic status. She filled up for my absences from my own family as I continued to work even after I was already married. She became a substitute mother during my active years in San Miguel. It was during those years that I was like a boarder at home. I left early in the morning to report for work and I came home too late in the evening so that I seldom attended to the needs of my own family. She made up for what I failed to do. She took care of my sons’ needs.

Who would forget this woman? She was a loving matriarch to all. No one who came to the rice mill, which she operated for a living, had left without sharing her grace. She was also a charitable person. She helped a lot of people. In the great flood of the year 70’s, her house was converted into an

evacuation center. She sheltered so many people. According to stories told about this incident, she fed so many people that the maid had to cook one sack of rice a day.

In 1993 she was diagnosed to have cancer. It is during this time of sickness that I saw the fruit of her piety and good works. She received so much spiritual and moral support from the parish community where she used to serve as an officer and member of the Catholic Women's League. Neighbors, friends, pastoral workers, seminarians and priests visited her from time to time. Her relative, Tino Panlilio, a Eucharistic minister regularly served during her reception of Holy Communion. Some of the priests who were beneficiaries of her generosity visited her, heard her confession and administered the Sacrament of the Sick. She received so much grace.

When she died on July 16, 1995, the Feast of Our Lady of Carmel, throngs of people came to the wake and on the day of her interment. Many masses were celebrated. Hundreds of Mass cards were sent along with beautiful flowers. What a vast crowd of people who attended the funeral of an unassuming person!

Today, when we visit her tomb the inscription touches us:

“IN MEMORY OF A LOVING MOTHER, A TRUE CHRISTIAN”.

Mang Pining is the Naomi of my life. When she died, I developed a strong desire to continue her apostolate in the parish. She must have prayed for that! Her death left my heart grieving. I suffered from emptiness and sadness. And in prayer, I often turned to her for motherly support. A few months after her death, our newly installed parish priest, Msgr. Tony Bustos whispered to me, “Can I give you an apostolate?”. I nodded. On December 31, 1995, I took an oath to serve as the Parish Pastoral Council Auditor in a very solemn installation rite. That started a beautiful ministry in the parish. Msgr. Bustos

empowered me so much. With all that he allowed me to do for the parishioners, very soon, like Ruth in the biblical passages, Mang Pining's "people in Mexico became my people." Mang Pining made God more real to me. I found God in the faces of the poor people I began to serve. I thank God for my Naomi. And I thank God for the people He sent me to serve.

CHAPTER IV

WATER FOR THE DRY SOIL

WHEN EVERYTHING I HAVE IS NOT ENOUGH

*“All man’s toil is for his mouth, yet his desire is not fulfilled.
For what advantage has the wise man over the fool?
Or what advantage has the poor man in knowing how to conduct himself in life?
What the eyes see is better than what the desires wander after.
This also is vanity and a chase after wind. (Ecclesiastes 6:7-9)*

During the early years of my married life, I enjoyed what every woman mostly desires...a good family, a wonderful career, possessions-intelligence, talents, treasures, gift of travels, fame, friends, etc. I had the liberty to spend my earnings according to my heart’s desire.

I had the chance to heal these issues of my childhood deprivations....

1. That Old-faded One Uniform – I bought yards and yards of clothes and had my dresses designed and made by famous couturiers. A lot of times, Mang Pining and Nok brought home from their travels abroad beautiful clothes and clothing materials for me. I also bought dresses made in Italy – the maker of fashion models’ dresses.
2. My second-hand Shoes and Plastic School Bag were replaced by a good collection of signature ones made in Italy in the likes of Salvatore Ferragamo, Bruno Magli, Colehann, Gucci and Bally.
3. No Adornment – Now, I acquired diamonds, pearls, gold...Oh vanity of all vanities! I couldn’t leave the house without wearing jewels.
4. Long distance walks to and from school – My husband provided me with a car and later I had the chance to own a brand new automatic Mitsubishi Galant.
5. No Educational Trips in School – God compensated me with tours to Hongkong, Vancouver, Toronto, Quebec, Victoria Islands, United States, Boracay, Cebu, Bohol, Northern Philippines, etc. I also had the

opportunity to be an exchange student in the Group Study Exchange Program of Rotary International to Ontario, Canada.

6. Squatting – I had the opportunity to acquire a house and lot in subdivision.
7. No allowance in School – I made sure I had a fat ATM account.

It sounds too good to be true! But at this point in my life I thought I needed all these to gain the respect of people and to be looked up to.

In the midst of abundance and luxury, I never forgot the virtue of generosity. Nor will I forget the benevolence of the Benedictines and my other benefactors. They were my heroes and models. I wanted to be like them. I wanted also to help the poor and the needy. I wanted to be a benefactor also. I thought that charity through dole-outs was the best way to help the poor. And so, with all that I was enjoying, I shared with those I wanted to help. Some of the recipients of my dole-outs were poor communities, orphans, out-of-school, beggars, victims of calamities and church constructions. Oh boy! I felt like Wonder Woman. I beamed with pride!

Was I happy after all? If I were to look at real happiness in the interior, meaning in the innermost core of my being, surely I was only fulfilling my peripherals at that time. Somehow there was a vacuum...an empty space that cannot be filled up by these worldly goods. And it is at this time that I sought...I searched...and God was just there waiting for me.

LIFE IN THE SPIRIT

*“The kingdom of God is like a merchant’s search for fine pearls.
When he found one really valuable pearl, he went back
and put up for sale all that he had and bought it.” (Matthew 13:45-46)*

I had anxiety. There was something more than material wealth. It is at this time that God came to my rescue.

Raymond Mungkal, an auditor in San Miguel who was assigned to do a special project, consulted with me regarding alleged malpractice in a subsidiary company of San Miguel. My husband happened to be a hauling contractor of the subsidiary company. Raymond needed links to his audit process. In the course of the audit, Raymond and I had wide-range of conversations that even led to spiritual matters. I was very much impressed with Raymond. I could see his interior happiness radiate through his bright eyes. He exuded an aura of serenity. I envied him.

One time Raymond invited me to attend a prayer meeting, which he regularly attended every Thursday after office at the Immaculate Heart Charismatic Community (IHCC) in Angeles City. He offered to give me a ride to and from Angeles. How could I say no? With that, I found myself looking forward to attending the prayer meetings every Thursday. Raymond always found a way to bring me home to Mexico. Lorna, his wife was so kind to me that later on she would get me as the godmother of her baby.

I didn’t realize that God was luring me to a more intimate relationship with Him. He made my heart yearn for him through the prayer meetings and the warmth of members of the IHCC. I found all the leaders and members (without exception) very warm and receptive. They always gave me a cordial welcome whenever I arrived. I also admired their way of praying. Their being so engrossed with God made me sense their special relationship with Him.

And the singing...oh how angelic were their voices! Raymond used to play the organ. Each song captivated my soul. How I wished I could be like them. And when I was invited to attend the forthcoming seven-week Life in the Spirit Seminar (CLSS), I immediately signed an application.

The Baptism in the Holy Spirit was the most special part of the seminar. Words are beyond this world to explain that experience. I felt the manifest presence of the Holy Spirit. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; therefore he has anointed me."(Matthew 4:18a) This happened in 1994. It was to be the beginning of another new life. It was my third birthday. Small changes began to occur in my spiritual life. These were to prepare me for the death of my mother-in-law and cultivated my desire to serve in our parish.

I would like to share how these changes slowly evolved...

The IHCC, through its covenant membership developed a formation program for aspirants. It included Acts of Piety and good works. We were to report to our flock leader our progress regarding our observance of daily Fixed Prayer Time, daily attendance of Holy Mass and reception of Holy Communion. We were to report also the number of hours or minutes spent in daily vigils at the Blessed Sacrament and the study of the Scriptures. We were encouraged to recite and meditate frequently on the Mysteries of the Holy Rosary, to fast and abstain, perform works of charity and attend the weekly Prayer Meetings and monthly recollections. Our leader, Tatang Frank Villanueva saw to it that priests were regularly available for our confessions. I imagined myself as an unveiled nun in the midst of the world! But I never felt that these were being forced upon me. I actually found them exciting. It was grace at work, for without grace, who could endure?

The longer periods of time spent with God allowed me to re-establish my bonds with my Creator, Savior and Friend. I began to develop a more intimate

and personal relationship with God. I began to appreciate the fixed prayer time at dawn. It is at this time that I learned to listen....yes, and to listen very well. Of course there were also moments when I slept with Him in prayer. It took some time to develop the habit of waking up an hour earlier than usual. I almost literally begged God to drag me from my bed, just to be faithful to that fixed prayer time.

My formation at the IHCC has been God's way of preparing me for a greater mission. The long hours of intimacy with Him brought me to discernment of His will.

DISCERNING GOD'S WILL

“Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you” (Luke 12:31)

One time I dreamt of St. Ignatius leading me to a certain book. I took that dream seriously and went to St. Paul's Publication in order to purchase the book written by St. Ignatius. It is the classic SPIRITUAL EXERCISES, which I believe contributed greatly to the spirituality of the Jesuits. The First Principle and Foundation, the Two Standards and the 'Rules for the Discernment of Spirits' that St. Ignatius wrote in this book enlightened me and brought me to the new work of God in my soul.

Fr. Ambu David, the spiritual director of our community, helped me a lot. He introduced me to the stages of prayer through the monthly teachings he gave us at the IHCC. He mentioned the books of Fr. Thomas Green, S.J., which I bought later. Fr. Green's "Opening to God" and "Weeds Among the Wheat" kept me company as my spirituality was developing.

I spent the next couple of years closely searching for the will of God. I wanted to do something for the greater glory of God and for the salvation of my soul and others. My journals were filled with longings and desires. I read many books about Spirituality written by our spiritual fathers. St. Francis de Sales' book, 'Finding God Wherever You Are' made a great impact on me. I became more meditative and contemplative. I reflected on the Scriptures. I also uttered frequently my favorite prayer, "Lord, help me to love and serve You the way You want to be loved and served". I repeated this over and over again in my prayer time, during the elevation of the Sacred Host and in my vigils at the Chapel of the Holy Eucharist.

I wrote my personal mission statement in my diary. It was a response to God's inspiration that I heard in my heart, telling me, "When you go back to me, I will not ask you if you became rich or a manager. I would only ask you if you became a good wife, mother and neighbor". Somehow this allowed me to look into my life as a corporate person. I was very engrossed with my career that I began to lose sight of the other aspects of life, like family, community and service. I know I was missing a lot. I then asked God what He wanted me to do. The desire to serve my family and the Church came very strongly but I hardly heard God literally tell me the specifics on what ways would be pleasing to Him. Later I would understand why. As I read the practical application guide provided by Fr. Thomas Green, I learned why God did not explicitly push His ways on me and on anyone. He works His way through us by beginning with our desires. That's why Fr. Green wrote in his book, "Weeds Among the Wheat" three crucial qualities or pre-dispositions of a discernor, namely; 1) A desire to do God's will, 2) Openness to God and 3) A knowledge of God.

God gave me inspirations on what to pursue, but he left the decision to me. He is our God who will never meddle with our free will. Sometimes I wished He would. Like, it's easier to feel comfortable about the paths we are going to take if the decision came from Him. A few times I prayed and surrendered my free will to Him. I used to be a 'segurista', very concerned with certainty that if something went wrong with my decision; I don't have to blame myself. On the other hand, I was already developing a spirituality of wanting to do only what God wants me to do and to follow His will.

Being a corporate person, I made sure that I just didn't use my heart in making a decision. I used my head and employed the Force Field Analysis, which I learned in San Miguel. It is a process of weighing the Driving Forces

and Restraining Forces for every alternative course of action. And depending on the circumstances, one's decision would be based on which had the highest score on Driving Forces and least Restraining Forces. As in my case, I had three alternatives: 1) to continue working in San Miguel Finance; or 2) to move to San Miguel Human Resources where I could at least work actively in developing human resources; or 3) to retire from San Miguel and take care of my family. Alternative three was always predominant. But the possibility of being biased in my scorings gave me doubt.

I went to different priests for spiritual guidance. Msgr. Sonny, Msgr. Tony, Msgr. Pablo, Fr. John, Fr. Ruben, Bishop Ongtioco, Msgr. Mar, Fr. Larry, Fr. Mon and Fr. Ambu listened patiently. Oh what a journey of searching! This journey lasted from 1995 to 1997.

January 1997- in one of our CLSS reunions, I received so much inspiration from the talks of Fr. Ambu and Fr. Deo. The statement, "Be a light in your family" convinced me even more to pursue early retirement from San Miguel Corporation. I could hardly wait to break the news to my superiors, Ruben and Ning-Ning. I set an appointment. I was very sure. I will avail of the early retirement program of our company. Finally I was able to tell them bravely that I will retire. And they broke another news to me that almost broke my heart. I was led to the desert of temptations....

THE THREE TEMPTATIONS

*“Then Jesus was led into the desert by the Spirit to be tempted by the devil”
(Matthew 4:1)*

First Temptation:

When I broke the news of my early retirement, why of all days did Ruben choose that same time to tell me that he received an advice from Management that he will be promoted and transferred to the Head Office in Ortigas? With his promotion, Ning-Ning will assume his position and I, being in the management developmental program was likely to be promoted to the position of Ning-Ning. I was devastated! Why did he not break the news yesterday or at least before I told him of my plans? Why now? Had he told me earlier, I could have at least reconsidered. Maybe I should have given my early retirement a second or third thought. When I joined San Miguel in 1980, my utmost aspiration was to reach the Finance Officer position.

That evening I cried hard to the Lord. In my Morning Prayer, I sobbed so much while telling Him that He had shortchanged me! I complained to Him and said that I felt like a child being offered a lollipop candy and when my hand was about to get it, it would be taken abruptly from me and licked right before my eyes.

My colleagues in Finance told me that I made the wrong decision and that I should have waited.

Second Temptation:

Ningning offered me to reconsider. She told me about the beautiful Finance Master Plan. She told me about my chances of being able to own a new car and be promoted to Payroll II. (In San Miguel, being in Payroll II was highly desired. It meant having the privilege to have one's own checking account from where one's payroll is drawn.)

Third Temptation:

If I stayed in San Miguel, I would be able to help more poor people. I would have more money to give. I could pursue more benevolent works of charity. I could enjoy life more with my family. I could buy the things that my children wanted. My future would be secure.

The three temptations were so enticing that I gave in for a while. I had my first resignation letter recalled from Human Resources Division in San Fernando. My succeeding resignation letter that was already sent to the Head Office was likewise recalled. While prolonging my stay for another year, deep inside me, I was longing to pursue my personal mission in life. Even in the ‘desert of temptations’ God was watching me.

HOLY INDIFFERENCE

“Faith is confident assurance concerning what we hope for, and conviction about things we do not see. Because of faith, the men of old were approved by God. Through faith we perceive that the worlds were created by the Word of God, and that what is visible came into being through the invisible.” (Hebrews 11:1-3)

I went to Fr. Ambu David in order to discern with me. I narrated to him all my experiences. I told him that deciding for an early retirement from San Miguel still comes very strongly to me, no matter what. After listening intently, he made me see the implication of my decision. He asked me about my attitude toward the possibility of extreme situations, which may happen after my retirement, for example, the possibility of losing every material gift that God gave me, like the exhaustion of my retirement funds, and the like. I simply replied, “Well, I have other things to sell. I have a car, a house and lot, etc... Besides from my childhood days, God has never failed to provide.” I told him about my faith experiences and that God never abandoned me.

Fr. Ambu was amazed at my pre-disposition. He told me that I possessed the quality of a follower of God – that of being very BRAVE! He told me that while listening to my narration of the past events in my life, he was having goose pimples and almost saw the devil trying to wreak havoc on God’s plan for me. He compared my experience with the Temptations of Jesus in the Desert. He pointed out to me the temptation of Power, Fame and Money.

I could not explain how I felt when Fr. Ambu was looking at my life with parallelism to the life experience of Jesus. Who am I to be treated by God that way? I mean, what is in me that God favors? Is there anything in my life that is worth comparing to the life of Jesus? I was so touched! At that moment, I felt that Fr. Ambu’s nod of approval was God’s way of telling me, “Yes, you

are on the right track. You have my blessing”. I felt as if the ‘thorn in my flesh’ was taken away.

A few months after, I returned to Fr. Ambu. I told him, “Fr. I have only one doubt remaining. How would I know whether God wanted me to still use my talents as an accountant, earn a living for my family or instead to pursue this calling? Wouldn’t it be complacency to be depending alone on Divine Providence?” Fr. Ambu then told me, “Do you know that there is such a thing as HOLY INDIFFERENCE”? He explained it to me and it clarified my doubts. It is a highly theological concept but putting it in layman’s terms, I understood it as being indifferent to whatever happens in my life. Whether I am going through a sad, unprofitable situation or I am experiencing success; either won’t affect me emotionally because of the discovery of the REAL TREASURE, Who is the HOLY ONE. And what makes one indifferent is the experience of God’s love and as long as I please Him, nothing else should matter. It is allowing God to work solely in my life and totally depending upon Him after employing all the means to discern His will. It is letting God take His role as I obediently follow His will. It is FAITH. With that, I felt liberated. I made a final decision. I will sign my irrevocable resignation.

CHAPTER V

GROWING AND BEARING FRUIT

LIFE BEGINS AT 40

“All things work together for the good of those who love Him” (Romans 8:28)

My early retirement from San Miguel took effect on January 31 1998, 19 days before my 40th birthday. Yes, I moved on to a new life. After all, “life begins at 40”.

New Life with husband:

I never realized how much I was missing. But upon retirement, when I had the time to eat breakfast with my husband, sit long enough for a good conversation and hang around him, I realized what I missed in 18 years.

New Life with Jay-Jay:

I missed the formative years of Jay-Jay. He was already fourteen years old when I retired. He was in fourth year high and should be graduating by March that year. I had barely a few months to enjoy being with my son. Soon he would be studying in Manila to pursue a course. The thought of parting with him gave me sadness and guilt. I wanted to make up. But somebody else was already filling up Jay-Jay’s need for emotional affirmations. He had already a girlfriend by this time. I was very jealous of his sweetheart. Fortunately, God gave me special time during my retirement to make as many emotional bank deposits as I could in order to win back my son. I tried to provide a listening ear to him whenever he had a misunderstanding with his girlfriend. I found this very tough!

Looking back now, had I not spent those few months with my son, I would not have been healed of my guilt feelings.

New Life with Joseph:

Joseph was lagging behind in school. One time, his teacher called for me and showed me his report card. He had a red mark in Mathematics and all his subjects except Music were graded at 7's. His poor performance was aggravated by his poor health. I had neglected him so much but God gave me time now to make up for my shortcomings. I brought him to school everyday in the morning. At noon I brought him hot lunch. While he was eating, I tried to assist him in his unfinished lectures. I would ask his classmates and teachers about the assignments for the next day and the project requirements. As classes would still resume after lunch and ended in two hours, I would just wait for him. On our way home, I would bribe Joseph with his favorite burger steak while asking him to promise that we would have tutorials later in the afternoon.

I spent hours and hours assisting Joseph, feeding him and tutoring him. Sometimes I would run out of patience especially when in the middle of our lessons he would beg off to sleep for a while or go to the comfort room or eat or whatever excuse he could think of. Weekends were spent in Manila for educational therapy. We spent a fortune for his Reading, Language and Occupational Therapy. Joseph was cooperative but at times I had to bribe him. He needed incentives to endure the hours of tutorials. Our patience and pocket were tested to the limits. But we persevered.

One day, when I picked up Joseph from school, his face was different. He was very joyful and excited, not only because it was a half-day class but more so because he had important news to break. As he boarded the car, he said with almost inexplicable joy, "Mommy, for the first time in my life, I got a line of '9' in my report card! I held his hand and felt so much fulfilled. Then along the way we sang a song, which would later become our theme song. Diana

Ross, one of my favorite singers popularized this song, “If We Hold On Together”. It is also the theme song of a nice film, “Land Before Time.” It goes...

“Don’t lose your way, with each passing day;
You’ve gone so far, don’t throw it away;
Live your story, faith, hope and glory,
Hold to the truth in your heart....

Refrain:

If we hold on together,
I know our dreams will never die.....”

Joseph would not have gone a long way in his coping mechanisms had I not intervened at that critical part of his school years. He was in grade two then.

New Life with Parents:

God gave me more time now to be able to pay regular visits to my parents, do marketing for them, and bring them to the doctor and sometimes to tour them to places they wanted to go.

Life had never been as fulfilling as at this time. Surely, God makes a way. I received so much consolation from the decision I made regarding early retirement.

“WE FIVE COMMIT” START OF MY PARISH MINISTRY

*“There is an appointed time for everything, and a time for every affair under
the heavens...
(Ecclesiastes 3:1)*

No, there’s nothing wrong with the title. It is simply our password in the parish. It started this way...

Our then parish priest, Msgr. Antonio Bustos commissioned Jess Punzalan, Nonoy Sandico, Elsie Bondoc, Rosalie Mandap and me to draft our parish pastoral plan. The five of us became the Parish Core Group on Pastoral Planning. We spent endless nights and months together. We ate together, prayed together, dreamed together, planned together and presented our work together. The mission statement articulated in the pastoral plan states... “We commit ourselves to implement the plan”

It took us a few months to finish the plan. The times we have spent with one another were invaluable. We learned to share our life stories. We began to trust one another. We became very open toward each other so much so that we could entrust our deepest feelings. We became a small faith community. We shared the joys and sorrows, hopes and fears of one another. Eventually, we began to own one another’s life that we formulated a mission slogan: WE 5 COMMIT. This was taken from our parish mission statement. It simply meant that no matter what happens, the five of us would stick it out with one another, through thick and thin.

This beautiful friendship made my parish ministry exciting. I always looked forward to serving in the parish. Then, little by little, my parish priest began to empower me.

Msgr. Bustos arranged that we attend the Parish Renewal Experience Seminar at the Good Shepherd Parish, Fairview. “We 5” were supposed to attend it. Unfortunately from this choice ‘5’, only Jess and I made it. Bro. Tino, Andy, Judith, Josie and Levy joined us. We became the PREX Seed Group in our parish. After one month, we started conducting the seminars in our parish. From then on, there would be a monthly conduct of PREX.

As my other three friends Nonoy, Rosalie and Elsie were all experiencing turmoil in their spiritual journey, I began to feel the impact of their absence from the parish ministry. Meanwhile, God used Jess and me tremendously in His work of renewal through the PREX. We didn’t stop convincing Elsie, Nonoy and Rosalie to join us. When we received resistance from them, Jess and I would just say, “We 5 commit”. Eventually, in God’s due time, each of them attended PREX in three separate runs. With this experience, I became more convinced that God has His own time and His own ways. He doesn’t hurry us nor force Himself upon us. When we are open to Him, He will use us tremendously. I know...for He did that to the five of us. Oh, we were so happy to be together again as we repeatedly said, “WE 5 COMMIT!”

GOD WILL MAKE A WAY

“For there is nothing that God cannot do.” (Luke 1:37)

I mentioned earlier that when I retired in 1998, I played a great role in Joseph’s educational interventions. Joseph’s Developmental Pediatrician referred us to a reading specialist, Teacher Rhoda, who was then working in a Reading Laboratory in Quezon City. I enrolled Joseph in her special tutorial sessions. Teacher Rhoda patiently taught Joseph the manner of writing properly and reading correctly. I was quite happy with the way she handled Joseph. She was very efficient and effective. Joseph was learning very fast and so I got excited over weekends when Joseph and I would go to Manila. Weekends were reserved for his therapies in Manila. Eventually, Joseph and I had to stay in Manila in summer for his daily therapies.

I received so many blessings during the times that I was struggling with Joseph’s educational concerns. These three ones are very significant:

First, I learned so much about learning difficulties of children during the therapy sessions. While patiently waiting for Joseph, I read books that were available in the reading laboratory. I came across books about early interventions and how to deal with learning difficulties of children. I began to explore the world of Dyslexia – how crucial is one’s understanding of it and how teachers and parents could work hand-in-hand to bring out the best from children suffering from it.

Second, while in Manila, my husband’s sister, Tet, accorded us free board and lodging in her place in a plush subdivision. She provided a driver to bring Joseph to and from Quezon City. Her children, Joana and Miggy helped Joseph handle easily the ordeal of extended hours of study. Joseph always looked forward to the allotted time for playing with them. Meanwhile, I helped

Tet in establishing financial system in her business. By the end of summer when Joseph finished the summer workshops, bound home to Pampanga, I was grateful to God for His provisions during that crucial part of Joseph's life. And as if God was not contented with His gifts to me, when I reached home and opened the trunk of our car to get our stuff, I received a great surprise. Tet sent me a brand new computer! It was neatly packed and placed in the trunk of the car. It was another dream come true! I was longing to have one in order to hasten my documentation work in the parish ministry. Being fond of writing, I knew it would make a lot of difference. (This computer is what I am using now in writing this book.)

My third blessing came in time for a pressing invitation by my parish priest to attend the PREX Speakers' Bureau Workshop. I was both excited and apprehensive. I was excited because my dream to be a preacher would come true. I was apprehensive because the workshop was scheduled on a weekend. And if I were to become a regular PREX speaker, it would mean that I could no longer accompany Joseph to his succeeding regular weekend sessions in Manila. I prayed to God that if He wanted me to be a speaker for PREX, He would make a way. The next series of therapy sessions in Manila came. Teacher Rhoda begged apologies to me that she could not accommodate Joseph anymore in her tight schedule. She endorsed me to Teacher Portia. While I got hurt with Teacher Rhoda's decision, I gladly accepted the endorsement. Later I came to know that Teacher Portia hails from Pampanga and her family resettled in Bulaon Resettlement after their house in Bacolor was buried with lahar. She asked me how I liked the idea of allowing her to just continue the therapy sessions in Pampanga whenever she went home for the weekend. I was very much surprised. Her request was what I exactly

needed! Joseph and I didn't need to go to Manila anymore! Besides, that meant savings for us – on gasoline, meals and driver!

God really made a way! Because of Teacher Portia's accommodation, I was able to attend the PREX Speakers' workshop. That started my Preaching Ministry. Msgr. Bustos later asked me to chair the Speakers' Bureau in our parish and I took charge of training our own speakers. From then on, I served regularly as a speaker in our monthly conduct of PREX. And to my surprise, God used this training that I received in the parish in a greater ministry later on.

IT'S NOT ALL A BED OF ROSES

“Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Trial or distress, or persecution or hunger, or nakedness?” (Romans 8:35)

Fr. Ambu’s prophecy came too soon! After my honeymoon with the Lord in the parish ministry, a lot of trials came into my life.

The 1998 Asian economic crisis severely devalued the Philippine peso. Interest rates on our business loans soared high. My husband and I decided to liquidate some of our high-interest bearing loans through my retirement pay. That meant giving up my financial security for the future.

The change in government leadership on June 30, 1998 dictated an enormous change in the leadership of the company where our business highly depended on hauling contracts. Even without valid reasons, our newly signed three-year contract was rescinded and awarded to a favored ally of the administration. This created a vacuum in our business and later it led to financial drawbacks because our strategic business projections did not materialize anymore.

The oil crisis had adverse effects on our new hauling business with a subsidiary company. Our profit margin was almost leveled to a break-even point as we continued to struggle with inflation while being deprived of an equitable increase in hauling rates.

The global crisis created a chain of crisis. Liquidity became a problem as tight cash flows caused delays in the collection of our receivables. Some companies who owed us a large amount opted to postpone payment of their obligations to us for an indefinite period of time. We had more than a million peso receivables that remained uncollected.

At the height of our crisis, one of our vehicles figured out in an accident in December 1999. In that mishap, a Honda Civic car was totally wrecked and we were forced to pay P-350,000.00. The insurance limit was only –P-50,000.00.

My bank savings ran out. I was practically jobless! The monthly allowance that I used to enjoy from our business had stopped coming in. Where will I get the money for my personal needs? How will I sustain other fixed expenses like the maids' salary, allowance of children, Joseph's tutorial fees and other necessities?

During these times, God's Divine Providence did not fail me. When I was desperate looking for money to pay for the Honda civic, my sister Rose called me up and said that while she was praying at the Blessed Sacrament, God kept insinuating to her that I needed help. As soon as she came home, she called me via long distance and asked me if I needed anything. She told me about her experience at the vigil room. After telling her my story, she told me to ask our driver, Raul to go to her house in Las Pinas. She drew me a check on 'payable when able' terms. With the money she sent, I was able to purchase the wrecked Honda Civic car. My husband's friend, who happened to be a mechanic, repaired the car and brought it to good running condition. For a long time, the car became useful to me.

God provided for our "daily bread" in a miraculous way! A friend that I met in PREX, Kuya Oden, who is in the meat business, taught me about meat processing. His unselfishness and brotherly love touched me! It is unlikely of a businessman to share his trade secrets with anyone. He demonstrated to me the process. He lent me his devices. He shared his helper with me. He gave me raw meat on credit terms. With what Kuya Oden did for me, soon I learned the industry and started selling to friends and relatives. My product became

the famous 'Ate Belle's Special'. Selling meat products to my colleagues in San Miguel came very easy. I received the support of my friends. They also got orders for me. Everyone was happy with my newfound business. It was only my father who was not at all happy. He took my 'fate' very hard upon himself. When he learned that his beloved CPA daughter was retailing meat products, he took pity of me. There were times that we met in church during Holy Mass attendance. Whenever I got his hand for a blessing, without saying a word, He usually embraced me and sobbed like a small child. I tried to console him by telling him that I was enjoying what I was doing. Yet, deep inside, I was hurting. I was questioning the Lord why I had to reach this point.

One thing I learned though that from whatever circumstances I had been into, there God made me a stronger and braver person. I held on. And God never left me.

THE GREATER CALL

“Jesus said to him, ‘Follow me.’ Levi got up, left everything and followed him.” (Luke 5:27a-28)

In October 2000, Msgr. Bustos asked me to attend an archdiocesan seminar about Formation. Being one of the two heads of our Parish Ministry on Formation, I had to attend it. The Archdiocesan Pastoral Secretariat (APS) headed by its director Msgr. Felicito Sison facilitated the seminar, which was all about Basic Ecclesial Communities (B.E.C.s). I hardly knew anything about it, but my curiosity was aroused during the presentation. I wanted to know more about it. And so I purchased a book that was up for sale after the seminar.

Jose Marins and Teolide M. Trevisan wrote the red book. It is entitled, “Basic Ecclesial Communities, The Church on a Small Scale”. Nothing about the title was deserving of my extra attention but there was a strong power behind it that magnetized me and urged me to reserve a special time to read it. Came First Friday, I took the book with me to the Carmelite Monastery where I stayed for nine hours in vigil before the Blessed Sacrament. I just couldn’t take my mind away from the book. And so I took the book in prayer. Lo and behold, my whole being was so captivated that I got my orange highlighter and marked all the lines that mesmerized me. I said, **“This is it! This is what the Church needs!”**

A tremendous power was at work in me. I could hardly wait till I arrived at the Archdiocesan Pastoral Secretariat. I shared with Msgr. Sison and his staff, Neng Pusung about my “awakenings”. I showed them the highlighted lines that I marked in the book. They just listened. But I knew from their eyes that

we were of “one mind and spirit” These awakenings were to be the foundation of God’s greater call.

Sometime in January 2001, Neng Pusung called me up at home. He turned over the telephone to Msgr. Sison, who asked me if I wanted to join them at APS. I was astonished but excited. I just couldn’t resist the idea that I could do something in the archdiocese. I told Msgr. Sison that I needed to pray over it and asked for an appointment with him so I could have a heart-to-heart talk with him.

The day of my appointment with Msgr. Sison came. I shared with him my predicament and all that God has allowed to happen to me. He told me to keep praying. He also asked me to include in my prayers the forthcoming national formators’ training workshop on Evangelization-PCP II & B.E.C. and that if I were disposed, he was willing to provide a sponsor for me. The fee amounted to –P-9,000.00. The other thing to be prayed for was my availability since it would be a 10-day live-in seminar. But I still had one great problem. A few weeks earlier I had accepted a consultancy project from my friend, Marylou. It was my way of helping her. She had been very supportive to me. The project’s objective was to be able to determine the Accounts Receivables of a health insurance company from its client bank with more than 7,000 enrollees. Over a long period of time, no general and subsidiary ledgers were established. An accountant reader would understand the extent of work involved in this project. When Marylou consigned the job to me, she gave me the payment schedules, vouchers, working papers and documents. These were to be recorded, classified, analyzed and reconciled with external data. I couldn’t figure out how I could finish the project. Marylou and I thought of automation. She asked a programmer to prepare a program to hasten the job. But even if the automated program were ready, I needed to encode the history

of accounts of more than 7,000 employees over the months that the insurance company had dealt with the bank. I was overwhelmed with the task. The least time that would take us to finish might be six months. And we were hitting a deadline. This meant that it was almost impossible for me to attend the 10-day seminar.

Even if that project was taking its toll on me, I prayed fervently. I asked God that if He really wanted me to attend the Evangelization Seminar He would make a way. I brought this to the Lord in one of my vigils at the Blessed Sacrament. One time at noon, in the middle of my prayer, God simply focused my mind on the accounting project. He flashed into my mind a formula on how to make the reconciliation. He showed me the steps on how to do it. When I finished my vigil, I immediately worked at my computer and started recalling God's instructions. It was early afternoon. I got so engrossed with what I was doing. God was leading me from one document to another, from one data to another and from one worksheet to another. The working paper designed by God in my mind was so clear that when I followed it, "Eureka", I got it! I was able to establish the missing link. It was then close to 12 midnight! I didn't need the automated program to work on. I had only God and an accounting background to rely on. I then concluded, **GOD IS AN ACCOUNTANT, TOO!**

I knew that God was preparing everything for me. He wanted me to attend the Evangelization Seminar. I also obtained the permission of my husband without difficulty. I did not renew anymore my teaching contract. I declined an offer to teach in summer.

My Realization:

God's call is greater than anything else is. It is greater than our problems. It is greater than our personal issues. I am grateful that He called me. The National Formators Training Workshop on Evangelization According to PCP II was the start of my heightened awareness of my mission in the church. It gave me a strong conviction of the kind of Church that God wants us to be. It gave me so much hope for the Church. Furthermore, it strengthened my faith. God gave me the grace to desire to serve Him through the promotion of basic ecclesial communities.

A few days after the seminar, I left everything in the hands of God and made a voluntary SELF-donation to the Archdiocese of San Fernando through the Archdiocesan Pastoral Secretariat on May 21, 2001.

This would be the beginning of a new chapter in my life...

INNER VOICES AND CONVERSATIONS

“Do not be conformed to the world where you live, but rather be transformed through the renewal of your mind. You must discern the will of God, what is good, what pleases, what is perfect. (Romans 12:2)

It was unthinkable and unimaginable that one like me from whom God had taken many material goods one after the other would still offer herself as a volunteer in pastoral work! This could only be understood in the light of faith. When I joined APS, I had no knowledge of what might lie in the future for my family and me. I had only one assurance: God.

I never stopped believing that everything has a purpose. God has always provided for my needs since I was small when I experienced severe poverty. He used many people to help us. I did not find myself wanting of the essential things in life. God never failed my family! Why should I think that He led me to my own destruction just because of the experiences of material detachments? In fact, God might just be sending me greater opportunities to confirm my love for Him and my desire to serve Him more in the way He wanted it. Didn't I pray, “Lord, help me to love and serve You the way You want to be loved and served”?

But some members of my family were not freed from doubts as I was pursuing the mission God gave me.

COMPETING VOICES:

Brother: (Through my sister, Rose)

How's Lyn (my childhood pet name)? What is the status of her Canada immigration plans? Tell her to consider pursuing her plans to work abroad and I will find a way to take care of the financial requirements. In this time of economic crisis and there seems to be

no hope for the Philippines, it is a great sacrifice on her part to work for her children's future. It is a noble deed for a parent to work for her children and to be selfless!

Sr. Delia: (after telling her about my brother's advice)

Always remember that wherever you go, there will always be problems. One problem may be solved but another problem would come in a different form.

Joseph: Mommy, if you were earning money, we wouldn't be in a difficult situation. You would have been a great help to Daddy!

Nok: Whatever would make you happy, go for it!

Jay-Jay: Mommy, we need not be this miserable. I miss those days....

On July 29, 2001, during the Sunday Holy Mass, the Gospel was about the way Jesus taught the disciples how to pray. I was feeling desolate. I was wondering if the reflections about God granting the prayers of a persevering person would apply to me. I was already pleading with Him; why for the past three years that I have been praying my prayers seem to go unanswered. Suddenly, God made me experience something. I couldn't believe it. His voice was very loud and clear....

God: If I were your lover and I am proposing a marriage to you and the only promise I could offer you is a life of poverty, would you still accept my proposal?

Myself: (I was stunned. I remembered the romantic films I used to watch when the rich girl would give up her wealth in order to marry her poor sweetheart. How ungrateful and materialistic could I be if I choose only a rich lover! What a shame if it were only for riches that I should marry

my lover!) I am very sorry, Lord. I am truly sorry! I love You and I will follow You wherever you would be pleased to take me! (I shed some tears of shame.)

Thus after receiving Him in Holy Communion, I consecrated myself to Him. I have never experienced such a wonderful union with Him. I felt it was a kind of SPIRITUAL MARRIAGE. My joy was beyond description.

On August 3, 2001, I decided to have a personal retreat and 9-hour novena at Carmel. I opted to fast and while so immersed in prayer for almost 4 hours, this happened...

Inner Voice: God speaks through His ordained persons like your brother. You may not like what he is asking you to consider, but if this were God's will, you need to obey. There is greater merit in obeying the will of God even when your humanness dictates otherwise.

After about a 15-minute break, I resumed my prayers and when almost two hours have lapsed, I heard again loud voices...

Myself: Oh how miserable am I! Lord, please help me! Please guide me. I am still in the middle of a storm. Lord, if you want me to go to Canada and earn a living for the welfare of my children and not for my personal desires anymore, please confirm it.

Inner Voice: It is not money that will make your children good. In the midst of material detachments, what they need is the presence and witness of a good mother. By your example shall your children become good persons. Why are you afraid? Am I not providing for your needs?

Another Voice: Not everything that comes out during prayer comes from God!

Inner Voice: In either way, whether you go to Canada or stay at APS, I would be pleased because it is out of love that you are considering doing something. You use your free will. And choose that where you'll be most happy in serving me. Whatever decision you make, I will bless you.

Myself: Lord, I would be happier to serve you in the work/mission of Evangelization. In this way, I can be of greater service to my family and fellowmen. Please give me the grace to start first with my family, then my neighbors, then to my community. As I do my work in APS, I trust you and rely on you to sustain me. May I do all for Thy greater glory and honor and for the salvation of my soul and others? Amen.

I then made up my mind to embrace God's will for me, to follow Him even in Poverty and to accept whatever He sends me. I decided to forego Canada...

CHAPTER VI

HARVEST TIME

OBEDIENT LIKE A SOLDIER

“I am the Lord’s servant...” (Luke 1:38a)

With a renewed spirit, I continued to participate in the life and mission of the church. God allowed me to bear much fruit. Together with Msgr. Sison, Neng Pusung and a few volunteers, I had the opportunity to facilitate Evangelization seminars and B.E.C. Orientation seminars. I went wherever God destined me to go. I simply obeyed. We facilitated two to three-day Basic Evangelization seminars for various pastoral workers and groups.

Our weekly offshore seminars in Bulacus, Masantol gave us exciting trips aboard a banca. I realized that there is so much beauty in this far-flung area. We, who reside in the urban area of Pampanga hardly, enjoyed this sight. The blue skies, green bushes and rustling sound of the rivers gave me deeper reflection on the vastness of God’s creation. The scorching heat of the sun was nothing compared to the privilege of being one with God’s people who have a deep thirst and hunger for the Word of God.

I also never imagined how God could use my humble service in facilitating B.E.C.-inspired recollections to Philosophy and Theology students of the archdiocesan seminary. At first I was hesitant to accept the invitation. I questioned my competence. How could an ordinary lay woman like me be trusted with the formation of God’s future ministers? I struggled much. I had no intensive study of theological and doctrinal truths. I didn’t know any better than the seminary formators who had masteral degrees in Belgium. Nor did I have any close relationship with any of the seminarians. I was practically a neophyte in the mission. I hardly knew anything about seminary life, even if I have a brother who is a priest. All I possess is the virtue of obedience. My volunteerism spirit springs from obedience to God’s will. Little did I realize

the implication of this obedience! It meant obeying even when I don't understand. It meant saying 'Yes' like a soldier. With this disposition, I accepted the invitation. I knew I would have to depend entirely on God. I prayed very hard. In prayer, God taught me to use my experiences as a mother. The seminarians were about the same age as my eldest son, Jay-Jay.

On the day of the recollection, I was able to establish rapport with the seminarians like I was their mother by making them feel like they were my own sons. I shared many stories with them about my childhood experiences and about my own family now. They were very interested to listen to my stories. They empathized with me. They were able to associate their own family experiences with mine. I facilitated their skills in listening, sharing and creativity in presentation and self-articulation. The two-day recollection brought out their best talents! At the end of it, the seminarians shared their very touching experiences and how God showed His love for them through their life experiences. Eventually, each one began to call me 'Mommy'. This relationship extended beyond the recollection days when I received text messages. I received another invitation to facilitate a recollection for the next batch. And once again, altogether we experienced God's love in a deeper way.

My experiences in the mission made me realize that God could use anyone powerfully. We simply offer our service in humble obedience. In deep appreciation of God's work in me, I continued responding to His call with utmost obedience.

GOD'S AFFIRMATIONS

“Be fervent in the Spirit and serve God. Have hope and be cheerful. Be patient in trials and pray constantly.” (Romans 12:11-12)

With all my high moments in the mission, a few weeks after, my temporal concerns grew worse. Debts grew and money became scarce. The children's school allowance and marketing needs could hardly be met. My Galant car was surrendered to a supplier in partial settlement of our debts. Again, I was tempted to look back and reflect whether I made the right decision or failed in my discernment.

At the height of desolation, God consoled and affirmed me through a retreat handled by Fr. Dong Lavarias, one of my spiritual brothers. He shared insights about Prayer and Discernment. I would like to share my reflections on the four dynamics of discernment as inspired by Fr. Dong.

1. SPIRIT – Enhancing the life of God in us:

I realized that my decision to join the Archdiocesan Pastoral Secretariat as a B.E.C. promoter has been abundantly blessed by God. It is in this work that I would be able to enhance the life of God in me, in my family and in the community.

2. Fallen Humanity – “the flesh”:

I became aware of the struggles in my discernment arising from my “fallen humanness” such as seeking affirmations. I am thankful that with God's grace I did not make a decision just to satisfy this human need but to rise above it and move outwardly. Alas, I am consoled that my discernment of working full time as a B.E.C. promoter did not arise from the need to seek affirmations or from the pitfalls of the ‘flesh’ but out of a desire to serve the Church.

3. Humanism:

I am now moved with deep gratitude to God for the material detachments that He allowed in my life such that I was prevented from doing something out of humanism. If I were not detached from my financial security, maybe, I would have been comfortable with ‘dole-outs’ as a way to reach out to the poor. But how God treats me in a very special way! He wanted me to transcend and so allowed me to participate in Integral Evangelization through the B.E.C. and thus to strive to empower the poor so that they do not become mere recipients of ‘dole-outs’. I realized that the trials I am undergoing are actual blessings! I have now a firmer conviction on my decision to actively participate in the implementation of the Second Archdiocesan Integrated Pastoral Plan (AIPP II). I am truly convinced that God has guided me in my discernment.

4. Darkness – spirit of the ‘lie’:

I am now more convinced that during periods of doubt, it was actually the spirit of the ‘lie’ trying to dominate the Spirit of God in me. The spirit of darkness was communicating to me the idea that God was displeased with my decision to pursue B.E.C., which is why all tides are against me. This evil spirit was also luring me to abandon the mission in favor of material advancements to be able to address my personal concerns in life.

Finally, when Fr. Dong presented the tests on discernment, I was overwhelmed with the joy and peace within me, as I am able to claim some fruits of God’s work in me. I have learned to love more because of my work in B.E.C. My life is being purified with simplicity and humility. I am driven with the desire to build the community of God’s people. And above all, I have accepted the Lordship of Jesus with utmost surrender! PRAISE GOD!

KNOCK...KNOCK...GOD ARE YOU THERE?

*“Let my cry for help reach you, Lord!
Give me understanding, as you have promised.
Listen to my prayer, and save me according to your promise!”
(Psalm 119:169-170)*

Occasional trials came into my life one after the other. One day in October 2001, I came to a point when I could hardly contain my sadness. It was a day when I practically had no money. The fuel tank of my car was empty. I couldn't report to APS to work. I was tempted to give God a deadline. I told Him that if He really wanted me to stay in the mission, He would do something within the week. I stayed home that day. I was sulking in my room for the good part of the day until I was able to compose myself. Later in the afternoon, I remembered calling Marylou. She was so excited to hear from me. She said that she missed me a lot for the past several months and asked to see me the following day if I didn't mind it.

When I saw her the following day, before doing anything else, she handed me a check. I could hardly believe her gesture. She told me that the health insurance company that I helped months ago was able to collect the receivables amounting to more than a million. She shared with me her consultancy fee from the project.

I shed tears. I felt a great embarrassment. How could I ever question God's ways? Why did I give God a deadline? Why did I put Him to the test?

And God did not stop there. A few days later, Dr. Antonio Ledesma, the Executive Director of the Center for Development of Human Resources in Rural Asia (CENDHRRA) and a consultant of our archdiocese expressed his concerns about Neng Pusung and me. He said, “Laborers deserve their keep”.

And so, he found justification to set aside funds to help cover part of the budget of APS. From then on, Neng and I enjoyed a modest honorarium.

God also used my friends to show His generosity. Estrell, my soulmate and co-worker in the parish and archdiocese received a Christmas bonus from the Department of Education, where she works as a supervisor. Hesitating to give money directly to me, she shared it with my two sons as generous Christmas gifts.

Aside from temporal blessings, God looked after my wholeness. He was also concerned with my holistic well being. God gave me Ellen. She is another soulmate and partner in the spiritual journey. She shared me her time, talent and treasures. She would bring me to places, treat me and listen patiently to all that has been happening in my life. I could never imagine how I would be able to endure my ordeals without a human ear and heart to listen.

More than anyone else, my own blood sisters and brothers had been very supportive of my family and me. They prayed and sacrificed a lot for me. They did whatever they could do for me. Also, my parents fasted for me. They shared their allowances with me.

Everyone that touched my life was a manifestation of God's love for me. God's love abounds everywhere and in everyone!

IT RAINS AGAIN... AND IT POURS

*“Then Job answered the Lord and said:
I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be
hindered,
I have dealt with great things that I do not understand;
Things too wonderful for me, which I cannot know.”(Job 42:1-3)*

The year 2002 was the most trying year in my life. It was the year of Job!

I had to choose between the comfort of driving my own car and the tranquility of having settled pressing financial obligations by giving up the car. I chose the latter. And so with much pain, I gave up that Honda civic car and the sentimental value attached to it.

A few weeks after, my husband received notices one after the other from the company where he had hauling agreements with. He was charged more than a hundred thousand pesos for alleged pilferage. Our truck drivers were being accused of pilfering the goods they transported from Mariveles terminal to satellite plants. The deductions from our billings were so big that we practically had nothing to collect anymore. Our business was going bankrupt. We had no more collections to pay our suppliers of diesel and spare parts. It became extra difficult to put up money for payroll. We resorted to more borrowings, as we hanged on.

The series of unfortunate incidents took their toll on me. My body gave way. No antibiotics and paracetamol could take away my fever of 12 days, until the doctor prescribed hospitalization sometime in May. But as soon as I came home from the hospital, the fever went back. Only a one-week treatment on steroids took the fever away. Up until now, there was no exact diagnosis of my health problem. Then, I suffered from anemia and went on

iron therapy. I was again hospitalized in June for a severe attack of amoebiasis. July was a rest month from the hospital. And right on the first week of August, I was again hospitalized due to abnormal bleeding. I underwent an obstetrical procedure.

As December was getting closer, I was getting more stressed. There was no money for the 13th month pay and for the Noche Buena on the 24th. No gifts to give to everyone. It was the first ever in my life when I did not wrap anything for my godchildren, parents, nephews and nieces. It was my saddest Christmas!

But while the rain poured hard on us, I still received many blessings. In all my hospitalizations, God was my only health insurance. Though my husband had to borrow money to get me out of the hospital, my brothers and sisters gave financial support to keep us by. In my last hospitalization I was amazed at how God provided. My sister-in-law, Tet sent money through bank transfers. The amount of the money sent was exactly the same amount as that of my hospital bill - neither a centavo more nor a centavo less. With it, my husband was able to pay the amount he borrowed from his friend.

Just before the year ended, we were able to mortgage our house and lot and to settle immediate obligations. Though this decision meant an increase in our indebtedness, I still found blessings with it. The bankers have so much confidence in our integrity. For indeed with God's grace, even with liquidity problems, God did not fail to provide funds for the checks that we drew. He never allowed a single check to bounce from the time we opened a checking account in 1988 and until the present!

BEYOND ALL, WHAT KEEPS US TOGETHER?

*“...But then I remembered the mercies of the Lord,
His kindness through ages past;
For He saves those who take refuge in Him,
And rescues them from every evil.” (Sirach 51:7-8)*

In all our trials, my husband, my children and I braced for a tougher year. Economists projected a bleak economic outlook for the year 2003! At the start of the New Year, my husband and I had to make a final decision. We talked to our employees. One after the other left. It was heartrending to part with people, who, mostly had been with us for more than ten years. Lina David-Castro, our ever loyal and dependable employee for more than 20 years is more than a treasure. It broke my heart to part with her. Lina comforted me. She told me that were it not for her financial condition, she would have opted to continue her services to us even without compensation. She is a real gem!

Jay-Jay, my eldest son was deeply affected by the closure of our business in February. He is taking up a Business Management course and dreamt of being able to apply his course and re-engineer the business in the future. His dreams all crumbled. We sold some assets and settled a good part of our business obligations. But debts are much more than the available funds. What would keep us by?

My husband found treasure in the junkyard...no, it was not gold mine dug from underground. He sold steel, spare parts and whatever was left that could still be of use to others.

By April, the proceeds from the sale of assets had been exhausted and God made way for a temporary business. With the remaining welding machine,

compressor and other equipment, my husband was to begin a small machine shop. Ernesto, Tet's husband had four of his dump trucks refurbished by Nok. By the time the four trucks were finished, Bong Sason, Nok's longtime friend since high school brought two trucks for refurbishing, too. Eventually, small vehicles that needing repainting were brought to our garage one after the other.

Money was just enough for the payment of amortization on our house and lot mortgage and other obligations. Provisions for our children's education and daily existence were still to be solved. More prayers were said. We did not lose hope. We remained steadfast in prayer. The more we suffered, the closer we became as a family. And God gave us more graces to persevere.

NEEDS RATHER THAN WANTS

“Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind...” (Romans 12:2)

Our children, though hurting, tried to keep up with us in the crisis that we were going through. Many times I felt guilty of depriving them of some material things. But the good thing about it is that this crisis tempered their desires. We tried to educate them on fulfilling needs rather than wants. It was with much pain that they learned this lesson. I love to recall these experiences...

Joseph had his own way of getting the things he wanted. He is the persistent type of person. He knows my ‘Achilles heel’ and would hit that at the right time and at the right place. There was a point in his life when he could hardly accept being denied of his wants. A few years back, he wished to have a new pair of shoes. But I abided by the lesson that I was trying to teach my children. If it were only a ‘want’, it wouldn’t be timely to spend for it at present. But certainly, if it were a need, I would find ways to secure it for them. And so with much tempering of desires, Joseph held on for quite some time without having the shoes he wanted. One day he told me, “Mommy, my feet ache badly with my old pair of shoes. There’s not enough room for my feet anymore. Mommy, this is no longer a ‘want’ but a ‘need!’” And so he got what he needed.

I also like to narrate how Jay-Jay survived the lesson of ‘need vs. want’. Jay-Jay enjoyed all the things he wanted as a child. He had a wide-range collection of all toys that most children would delight upon. His daddy and I provided him the best of everything. There was hardly an unfulfilled desire. And so one time, when he came home, his remarks pained me. “Mommy, I

sometimes develop self-pity. My friends told me that I used to be the first to own the newest craze in town – shoes, shirts, pants, game-boys, etc. But now, Mommy, look at my shirt, it's faded and I have only two pairs of pants. But Mommy, I understand. I don't demand from you”.

Yes, I do appreciate Jay-Jay and Joseph for bearing with us during our crises. And I am very glad to have instilled in their minds the valuable lessons in life.

Surely, if there were beautiful things that came out of these trials despite the unfortunate circumstances, I cherish most the love that kept us together as a family and the values formed in my children!

MORE BLESSINGS!

“Truly, whoever has left house or brothers or sisters, or father or mother, or children, or lands for my sake and for the Gospel, will not lose his reward. I say to you: he will receive a hundred times as many....” (Mark 10:29-30a)

I found love abounding in our nothingness. Gifts on my birthday came in the form of cash and goodies from family members and relatives. My special friend and ‘mother’ in the parish, Ate Isang Panlilio, who had been very supportive to me, sent me a sack of rice. She sent it on the day that the last grains of our supply were cooked!

Six of my husband’s family members are abroad. Marina and Nonie are in Vancouver, Canada while Titay, Precy, Jovie and Martin are in Portland, Oregon. When they heard that we were going through tough times, they pooled their resources and pledged regular monthly support. Tet religiously sends the money and goodies to us.

God does not really bring us down to zero. I could never cite an instance when there was nothing at all for a meal. There was always something, even just a small can of sardines! I remember Fr. Ambu say, “Don’t say there’s nothing when there is a little”. Sometime in June, Auntie Zon, sister of my mother-in-law visited us. It has been a long time since the last time that she came over. At the time she came, our groceries consisted of the remaining two cans of mackerel from our relatives abroad. In her visit, Auntie Zon brought us grocery supply that would last for about a month. When she came the following month, she brought us a sack of rice. Yes, it was the second time I experienced receiving a needed gift just when the last grains of our supply had just been cooked!

ONE COMMUNITY...ONE HEART

“They spent their time in learning from the apostles, taking part in the fellowship, and sharing in the fellowship meals and the prayers.” (Acts 2:42)

I spend a good part of life with APS. It is here where genuine community relationship had been both tested and fostered. I have a great deal of interactions with our spiritual director, Msgr. Felicito Sison and the staff members, Neng Pusung, Allan Rivera, Vic Martin, Edith Mesina-Rivera and Marlen Palomares. Our regular weekly Jesucentro or Lectio-Divina sessions have created bonds of friendship, lifted our relationships to spiritual realms and offered us experiences of being one in heart and mind!

Who could ever forget some incidents like the following?

I was co-facilitating the 10-day National Formators Training Workshop on Evangelization on April 24-May 3, 2003. We planned for a vacation in Baguio after the seminar. It would be our treat for the past two months that we had been facilitating Lenten recollections. While immersed in the mission, I was deeply struggling on how to cope up with the financial needs of my family. Enrolment was due in a few days. I didn't have the money to pay for my children's enrolment. I started to develop self-pity and negative emotions were building up in me. I finally decided not to join the Baguio trip. When Msgr. Sison learned about my decision not to join them in Baguio, he was greatly disappointed since I was the initiator of the idea of a vacation. But here is how our community spirit prevailed. Through our dialogue of life, Neng learned about my predicament. He lost no time in sharing it with Msgr. Sison. Naturally, Msgr. Sison grew weary and became disturbed.

Just before the end of our 10-day national seminar, Msgr. Sison was visited by a highly revered personality in our archdiocese. Msgr. Sison mustered all

his guts to tell his visitor about my predicament. Without another word, his visitor, who asked to remain unidentified, volunteered to give me the exact amount that I needed. Problem solved! I was able to enroll my son. I had the great opportunity to spend a meaningful vacation with my APS community. My husband joined us in Baguio.

That vacation is unforgettable! A close friend of Neng offered his residence in Baguio for free. Our meals were subsidized by our common fund, which was given to us as honorarium during the conduct of retreats. Msgr. Sison tried to make us feel the warmth of his love, not only as our spiritual director but also as a brother or father to us. He fed us to our heart's content. There was hardly an unfulfilled desire. Whenever we insinuated wanting to eat a particular kind of food, he got it for us! If we wanted ice cream...in a few minutes, ice cream was there. We happened to mention corn...then all of a sudden there was corn. Neng wished for Pizza...then there were pies! Msgr. Sison also knew that we like noodles. He got noodles for us! He sensed that I wanted to hear daily Mass. Even when he was already tired at the end of the day, he saw to it that we heard Mass at the Baguio Cathedral.

Looking back at the Baguio experiences and similar experiences back in the office, I cherish them all in my heart. When I think of Msgr. Sison, I could feel how God lavishes me with love through the pampering he does. God is very much present in him and in our APS community.

ONE MORE STORY...

“Out of my distress I called to the Lord, and He answered me” (Jonah 2:3)

Fr. Deo Galang, the Executive Director of SACOP and I had an opportunity to interact. Fr. Deo heard that I am a CPA with a rich experience in Finance. In October last year, He asked me to co-facilitate a seminar for the ten dioceses, which, like the Archdiocese of San Fernando are beneficiaries of the project of the National Secretariat of Social Action (NASSA). The seminar was about BEC Program Management. He took Gai and me to Cebu. I handled the Financial Management part of the seminar.

When we went back to Pampanga, Fr. Deo shared his dreams and aspirations for SACOP’s own Accounting and Finance Dept. From then on, he would pay regular visits to the APS office. APS is housed in SACOP’s Ephatha Building. It just takes Fr. Deo a few steps to get to our office. Sometimes he would also send his staff to consult with me on how to improve SACOP’s budgetary and accounting system.

My conversations with Fr. Deo went beyond business matters. It transcended to more personal sharing. We became closer to each other. He was surprised to hear my stories. From my externalities, he never suspected that I was going through the most difficult years of my life. I also shared with him my personal mid-life crisis. He was very sympathetic. The times I spent with him were invaluable.

One time I asked Fr. Deo to help me pray. I told him that I was discerning whether to stay full time at APS or to pursue a part-time job outside while continuing my apostolate in the archdiocese. He then said, “Why don’t you just consider SACOP if that is the case? I mean, you can have a part-time consultancy service at SACOP and continue with your APS apostolate. At

least you just walk a few steps away, and you can transfer from one office to another.” That stunned me! I didn’t expect such an offer.

I brought the new developments to the Lord in prayer. I asked God to purify my intentions. I offered to Him my desire to follow only His will. I told God that if compensation were to be an issue as regards my sincerity, I asked Him to even take it away. I renewed my faith in Him.

The succeeding events in my life drew me more and more to a much greater call of God as I just signed a one-year financial consultancy contract with SACOP.

And with all that God has allowed to happen, He was never remiss in providing my family’s “daily bread”.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

THE SOWING GOES ON...

“Many run, but only one gets the prize. Run, therefore, in order to win it, as athletes who impose upon themselves a rigorous discipline. Yet for them the wreath is of laurels which wither, while for us, it does not wither. So then, I run knowing where I go.” (1st Corinthians 9:24-26)

My dear Reader, I am about to conclude this book. I have shared my most intimate recollections with you. I hope I shared the story of my life without glorifying myself but instead glorifying God who lifted me up – a sinner. He used my weaknesses so that we can see the power of God in the lives of sinners like me.

It’s past ten in the evening. Jay-Jay is still burning his eyebrows and accomplishing his project in Management. Joseph is sleeping tightly. I look at them with love. How tall they have grown! I reminisce the day I was watching them in their nursery cribs. Yes, how swiftly time flew! Their well-developed bodies show how God lovingly took care of them. Then I look at my husband, who just arrived from his work. He has been working extra hard with a new project. The silvery hair, reddish, sunburned skin and few wrinkles on his forehead show the weight of the ordeal he has gone through. But I sense his serenity. I feel the warmth of his love as I approach and kiss him. He is still the same loving and faithful friend that I married 20 years ago. He is the epitome of hope, fidelity and love. Oh, I feel so good about this life!

As you close this book dear Reader, don’t forget to pray for us so that we will continue to sow seeds of love as we continue to pray for you, too....

GRATITUDE FROM THE BOTTOM OF MY HEART

I thank God for...

- My husband, Nok and sons, Jay-Jay, Joseph; Tang, Ima; Sr. Delia , Elda, Romy, Doreen, Fr. Larry, Forting, Rose and Peng
- My in-laws (Carling Batac, Fler Singian, Oscar+, Pat Werda, Kit Chavez, Lillian Singian, Willy and Mel Katigbak, Meding and Totttie Imperial, Marina Katigbak, Titay and Steve Schommer, Frida and Osbu Banico, Precy and Henry Ngan, Jovy and Baby Katigbak, Martin and Gina Katigbak, Nonie Katigbak, Tet and Ernesto Lim)
- Rose Basco and the many faithful house helpers who relieved me of my house chores as they accomplished their work efficiently and effectively.
- My community at APS gives me so much love and inspiration. Our director, Msgr. Sito Sison continues to shape my spirituality. Neng Pusung has always inspired me to go on. While journeying with him, his convictions and zeal in working for the poor opened my horizons and allowed me to look at how little I am doing for the Church. Edith Mesina-Rivera, Marlen Palomares, Allan Rivera, Beth Garcia, Lanie Samson and Tang Vic Martin have always encouraged me to continue and have been extra helpful especially during my time of sickness.
- Dr. Tony Ledesma, our consultant, deeply touches my life with his words of wisdom, thoughtfulness, love and concern. He taught me much about the purest love in friendship as inspired by our patroness, St. Catherine of Siena. His wife, Dr. Angelita has always shown her extra concern for me. Her untiring care of her Ima mirrors for me God's own constant love for us.

- Baby Supan, my sweet and thoughtful friend, who tried to show her love for me in simple but most touching ways. She expressed her love through the bananas, atis, guyabanos, egg crackers, native snacks and whatever she could think of to share with me.
- My old and true friends who stood by me in good and bad times – Marylou, Ellen, Josie Yusi, Estrell, Ningning, Lolly, Deng
- My new SACOP family who has been very supportive of me;
- Fr. Chito Carlos, Msgr. Tony Bustos and Msgr. Jingco, my parish priests and spiritual friends who have been guiding me along the way
- Fr. Dong Lavarias, my counselor, friend and spiritual guardian who taught me how to value my core;
- Fr. Elmer Dimarucut, MSP, for helping me rediscover myself during my mid-life crisis;
- Fr. Romy Hitosis, SSP, for never failing to provide a listening ear and heart;
- Everyone, who continues to make me feel that LIFE IS TRULY PRECIOUS and that even in my emptiness, they regard me as a REAL GIFT FROM THE LORD!
- And YOU, MY DEAR READER who patiently held this book in your heart.

Thank you God for everything. My journey to You, together with the people you gave me - continues....