

**JUSTICE
AND TRUTH
WIN FREEDOM**

JUSTICE AND TRUTH WIN FREEDOM

The fight against women and child sex
slavery

A revised version of Passion and Power

SHAY CULLEN

Justice and Truth Win Freedom
The fight against women and child sex slavery

Copyright © Shay Cullen 2026
The moral rights of the author have been asserted.

ISBN: 978-94-03925-29-5

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photography, recording or any information storage or retrieval system, without written permission from the publisher. This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior permission in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

This book would never have been written were it not for my parents, John Joseph Cullen and Mary Elizabeth Bradshaw, who gave me life and made my mission possible.

The Columban Missionary Society, that assigned me to the Philippines in 1969.

My heartfelt thanks to Merly Ramirez who helped me begin Preda in 1974.

Francis Bermido Jr., Preda President, who edited and advised me in writing this book.

Amabelle Facturanan, who has been supporting Preda Fairtrade for almost 30 years.

Donardo Angeles and Roger Hermogino, who implement the Fair Trade projects.

Eric Flores and Jazriel Ignacio, for the layout, formatting, and final version of the memoir.

Edward Robinson, for invaluable technical assistance.

Danny Smith, of the Jubilee Campaign, whose life and support are a powerful inspiration.

All the PREDA staff and supporters that made the PREDA projects a success for the past 52 years, helping over two thousand children and giving them a happier and better life.

AWARDS AND HONORS

The awards and international honors bestowed upon Fr. Shay Cullen, the Preda Foundation, and our dedicated team reflect decades of frontline action—rescuing, healing, and empowering survivors of human trafficking, abuse, and illegal imprisonment. Far from being mere accolades, these recognitions belong to the brave children who reclaimed their freedom and to the global community of advocates standing together in the pursuit of justice and human dignity.

Nobel Peace Prize Nominations

- 2001 Nobel Peace Prize Candidate
Nominated by Nigel Griffiths, MP in the British Parliament (Scotland).
- 2002 Nobel Peace Prize Candidate
Nominated by the Hon. David Kilgour, MP for Edmonton Southeast (Canada).
- 2003 Nobel Peace Prize Candidate
Nominated by Christa Nickels, German Human Rights Commissioner and Member of Parliament.
- 2017 Nobel Peace Prize Candidate
Nominated by Dr. Bärbel Kofler MdB, German Human Rights Commissioner; Members of the German Parliament, and presently Parliamentary State Secretary to the Federal Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

International Human Rights & Humanitarian Awards

- 2000 | Human Rights Award of the City of Weimar (Germany)
Recognizing extraordinary courage in defending victimized children and confronting human trafficking.

- 2000 | Betinho Communications Prize (Association for Progressive Communications)
Awarded for innovative use of communication in advocating for justice and human rights.
- 2001 | Human Rights Award of Ferrara (Italy)
Honoring dedicated international frontline advocacy against child exploitation.
- 2003 | Prix Caritas (Switzerland)
Presented for exceptional commitment to protecting vulnerable children and upholding human dignity.
- 2008 | International Person of the Year Award (Ireland)
Awarded in recognition of lifelong global service and human rights leadership.
- 2008 | The International Solidarity Prize (Spain)
Bestowed by the prestigious 180-year-old Academy of Medical Practice in Barcelona.
- 2009 | Irish Music Awards Humanitarian Award (Ireland)
Recognizing compassionate global outreach and social advocacy.
- 2016 | The Monsignor Hugh O’Flaherty International Humanitarian Award (Ireland)
Awarded to Fr. Shay Cullen for brave and selfless devotion to rescuing endangered youth.
- 2017 | German Shalom Prize for Human Rights (Germany)
Presented by the Justice and Peace Committee of the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt.
- 2017 | An Cathaoirleach Humanitarian Award (Ireland)
Conferred by Dún Laoghaire–Rathdown County in honor of outstanding humanitarian contributions.
- 2017 | Martin Buber Plaque (Netherlands)
Presented jointly to Fr. Shay Cullen and Francis Bermido Jr. (Preda Foundation President) for exemplary commitment to human dignity and dialogue.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I wish to express my deepest gratitude to two extraordinary wonderful people whose lifelong commitment to human rights, global justice, and the defense of the vulnerable has been a source of strength and solidarity for my work and the mission of the Preda Foundation.

Mary Robinson

I am immensely honored to acknowledge Mary Robinson, whose historic, global leadership in international law and ethical governance has provided the foundation for this book's introduction. Mary Robinson has broken barriers at every level of her distinguished career, notably serving as the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights from 1997 to 2002, and as the 7th President of Ireland (1990–1997), where she made history as the nation's first female head of state.

Today, Mary Robinson continues her vital global service as an active member of The Elders (having served as Chair from 2018 until stepping down in late 2024), Adjunct Professor for Climate Justice at Trinity College Dublin, and Patron of both the International Science Council and the Institute for Human Rights and Business. Her lifelong dedication to elevating the voices of the marginalized is an inspiration to us all, and her contribution to this book is an honor and an inspiration.

Martin Sheen

My heartfelt thanks to Martin Sheen (born Ramón Antonio Gerardo Estévez), an acclaimed American actor, devoted human rights activist, and a close friend. Martin's support has extended far

beyond words; in November 1997, he traveled directly to the front lines of our struggle in the Philippines, joining me at the dangerous Payatas rubbish dump in Quezon City to advocate for the rights and safety of endangered scavengers. Tragically, our public warnings went unheeded by authorities, and less than three years later, a massive, predictable landslide buried hundreds of innocent people in that very spot. Martin's lifelong solidarity with the poor is an inspiration for many

Widely recognized for his iconic, generational roles as Captain Willard in *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and President Jed Bartlet on *The West Wing* (1999–2006), Martin has balanced a legendary career with a strong commitment to upholding human rights. Married to his wife, Janet Templeton, since 1961, he is the proud father of actors Emilio Estevez, Charlie Sheen, Ramón Estevez, and Renée Estevez. In 2006, Martin stood by my side once again to launch the first publication of this book, *Passion and Power*, in Ireland on the RTE program *Saturday Night Live*, helping to carry our message into thousands of homes within weeks. I am forever grateful for his enduring friendship and dedication to defending human dignity.

Shay Cullen
shaycullen@gmail.com
Preda Foundation Inc.,
Olongapo City, Philippines

FOREWORD

By Mary Robinson

The overriding priority of human rights is to protect those who are vulnerable or at risk. The need to protect the human rights of women and children, of human rights workers and of journalists and people impoverished and oppressed has never been as urgent as in today's troubled world.

Human rights defenders come in all shapes, sizes, and walks of life. They may be teachers, journalists, lawyers, religious workers, students, unemployed, elderly, skilled or unskilled. During my term as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, it gave me particular pleasure to meet those who also spoke with Irish accents and had the humor and practical common sense which is invaluable in grassroots work. Such a human rights defender is Father Shay Cullen—both ordinary and extraordinary at the same time.

His book, *Passion and Power*, telling of his experiences as an Irish missionary of the Columban Fathers in the Philippines, provides a remarkable story of thirty-seven years defending these rights and working to provide positive life-giving alternatives to victims and people marginalized and abandoned.

Our paths crossed but twice. The first was in Kilkenny when I gave a keynote speech as President at the opening of an international conference on Fair Trade. Fr. Shay made a lasting impression on all of us there as he represented the life experience of Filipino artisans and fruit farmers. This book tells a remarkable story of the development of Fair Trade in the Philippines as a life-giving solution to thousands of crafts people and farmers.

We met again in Geneva during my UN days, when I encountered the dedicated and diverse range of adults and young people involved in the Global March to end child labour. The pages of this book are filled with the struggles and hardships involved in defending human rights and with the hard-won victories and achievements too. Here we read of the many campaigns undertaken by Fr. Cullen and his courageous Filipino human rights workers taking stands against the death penalty, and extra-judicial executions and their successful campaign to persuade the Congress of the Philippines to bring in new laws to protect women and children.

Passion and Power is an apt way of describing the author's conviction and commitment, shared by his team, in defending human rights which come across with inspirational force.

The heart-warming stories of the children rescued from sex slavery and terrible prison conditions give us all encouragement to work on for the realization of universal respect for human rights and non-violence as the most influential way to bring peace to our divided and anxious world.

I strongly encourage everyone to read this inspiring book.

*Mary Robinson
New York
September 2006*

PROLOGUE

The Philippines in 2026 is facing involvement in a possible military conflict in Southeast Asia since it has become the site of nine US military bases under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) since 2014 that are facing off against China. Beijing has established military bases on artificial islands built illegally on Philippine reefs. The face-off is over the possible invasion of Taiwan by China and the November 2025 threat of Japan to respond with military force in the event of such an attack. This has raised tensions in the region. In response to Japan's threat, China has warned of a large-scale conflict involving the United States with global repercussions of "unimaginable consequences." The Philippines is presently in a "strategic entrapment" between the superpowers, and that is making the Philippines a prime target in any military confrontation. The declassified 2018 U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific mentioned "defending countries in the first island chain, including Taiwan." In 2023, the Philippines allowed the establishment of nine U.S. Military Bases inside Philippines Bases throughout the Philippines. This is setting the scene where history will repeat itself and the abuse of women and children will expand. Besides, the Philippines is now a prime target in any conflict between the U.S. and China over Taiwan.

When I first came to the Philippines in September 1969 as an Irish missionary, I was filled with idealism to help the downtrodden and impoverished Filipinos. My first assignment was in St. Joseph's Church in Olongapo City in 1969. Olongapo was the homeport of the US 7th Fleet in the South China Sea. The parish of St. Joseph's was situated in the center of a city that provided unrestrained "rest and

recreation” for the thousands of American servicemen on leave from the Vietnam War that made it a city with many sex bars and brothels. The young women—many of whom were minors—were victims of human trafficking from distant provinces and recruited into the sex industry, where they could never leave because of unpaid debts. This memoir tells the story of the mission I started with courageous Filipinos to save these thousands of women and children in the sex bars and clubs held by debt bondage and left to die of HIV/AIDS and other diseases. I started a campaign in 1983 to close and convert the US bases, and it succeeded. In 1992, the US bases closed, and thousands of women and minors were freed. Now in 2025, the US bases are back, and a war with China over Taiwan threatens the Philippines. Sex tourism, human trafficking, and child abuse are worse than ever since 2014. Yet we fight on. I want to tell you the story about what has happened since I first started the Preda Foundation in 1974 to help the exploited women and children. Preda's social workers have saved thousands of victims and survivors of human trafficking and child abuse. We have also saved hundreds of boys and girls from horrific, subhuman, illegal detention cells in Manila jails and given them a new, separate home and start in life. CNN and other news channels featured video reports about the terrible conditions of children behind bars and the rescue effort made by Preda social workers. I testified about these violations of child rights twice at a US Congress subcommittee headed by Republican Representative Chris Smith from New Jersey.

I was 27 years old when I first came to the Philippines, and my enthusiasm to save the world was quickly dampened when I learned there were so many victims of dire poverty and exploitation working as sex slaves to satisfy the sexual fantasies of US servicemen. Their poverty was caused by a long history of Spanish and American colonial rule that is continued today by a powerful political system run by wealthy Filipino dynasties. They pass legislation that favors themselves and the multinational corporations that exploit the Philippine natural resources and the economy for their own benefit.

They allow the presence of foreign military bases, and local governments give permits and licenses to thousands of sex bars where women and children are held and cannot go home. I want to describe what I saw and experienced in Olongapo City when it was a shocking “Sin City” and how we helped change it for the better.

Being Irish with a history of similar exploitation in my own country’s history, I found this social inequality gravely unjust, immoral, and totally unchristian in a predominantly Catholic country. At first, I felt powerless and overwhelmed, and I questioned if I had made the right choice in becoming a missionary priest.

The simple gospel-based theology of liberation and social action gave me a better understanding of being a Christian. This motivated me to find ways of helping the poor escape exploitation and poverty through starting a fair trade business. It was a long struggle that still continues. I set up the Preda Foundation in 1974 to shelter and protect young people from summary execution during martial law. It became a haven for young people in conflict with the law whose lives were at risk. Then the local authorities in Olongapo City declared they would close the Preda children’s home. I countered that by calling for the closure and conversion of the US bases. This got a lot of media attention, and I started off the anti-bases campaign that spread nationwide. This succeeded in 1991 when the Philippines senate voted against renewing the military bases agreement with the United States and my proposal to convert the U.S. base facilities to a commercial economic zone was implemented.

Our work was not over; it was just beginning. Sex tourism was growing, and we answered that in an interesting way by bringing some foreigners and local child abusers to trial and winning convictions. Nowadays our work continues to heal victims and challenging the online sexual abuse through international advocacy on social media.



INTRODUCTION

When I first arrived in the Philippines from Ireland 56 years ago in September 1969, I was a 26-year-old newly ordained member of the Missionary Society of St. Columban. I was filled with idealism to change the world, to help the poor, and do justice for the downtrodden. I was to discover liberation theology and put it into practice. My life's journey has been one of challenge, adventure, danger, hope, fulfillment, and enlightenment. I will tell you about some of that in this book. Now on September 27, 2024, I was going to the Preda Foundation's children's therapeutic healing home for trafficked and abused girls to celebrate 50 years of missionary work.

One of my many life experiences has been rescuing, protecting, and with a team of dedicated Filipino professionals, healing and empowering hundreds of abused and trafficked children and helping them get justice and win court victories. Establishing the Preda Foundation in 1974 and directing its programs and services with a dedicated Filipino team has been at the heart of my life's work. Now we are about to celebrate the 50th-year Anniversary.

I had many memories and mixed emotions as I drove north from the Preda main administration center that is on a hill overlooking the magnificent expanse of Subic Bay near Olongapo City. I have lived most of my missionary life there since 1974, and I was on my way to the Preda children's home for recovering girls. The home is a spacious octagon-shaped building situated in a quite secluded forested enclave in Sacatihan, Subic, a thirty-minute drive from Olongapo City.

I founded the Preda Foundation in 1974, a children's human rights organization to protect teenage boys from the Marcos death

squads and illegal imprisonment. Later, the work expanded to addressing the social inequalities and saving sexually abused, exploited girls. The Preda team of professional Filipinos has continued this work especially during the regime of President Rodrigo Duterte, saving young people in danger from the Duterte assassination squads in his war on drugs and the poor. In 1996, I opened another home for teenage girls who were sexually abused minors and child victims of human traffickers and later for child victims of online sexual abuse and exploitation.

The abuse continues to grow.

We are up against a horrific common crime against children. According to the World Health Organization, sexual violence is inflicted on minors to the extent that 1 in 5 girls and 1 in 7 boys report sexual abuse. UNICEF says that more than 370 million girls and women alive today – or 1 in 8 – have experienced rape or sexual assault before reaching the age of 18 years.

Many more are victims of physical and online sexual abuse and harassment. When the Preda homes were set up with a team of social workers and psychology graduates as therapists, we were able to rescue, heal, and empower over a thousand trafficked and sexually abused female children from 1996 to 2024. And since 1974, almost two thousand boys were rescued from Philippine prisons and youth detention centers and were protected, given legal assistance, healed, educated, and helped to start a better life.

Most of the girls and boys recovered and were empowered by the Emotional Release Therapy, a therapy that I introduced to the Preda therapeutic homes. This is based on the theory of Primal Therapy of Arthur Janov. This enabled the girls to overcome their fear of their abusers and human traffickers, and to testify clearly in court and win an average of 20 convictions against their abusers or traffickers a year. This was their start to a new life of freedom and betterment. The therapy helps the boys in two Preda homes, one in Zambales and one in Cebu, to find self-confidence and determination to overcome childhood poverty, abuse, and neglect and have a good

future with education. We were now celebrating all this and much more after fifty years. This was not a journey without many dangers, harassment, death threats, and legal struggles to ourselves as we had to challenge and confront the wrongdoings of authorities, the operators of the sex industry, human trafficking syndicates, and the telecommunications corporations that allow child abuse images and livestreaming of child abuse through their Internet Service Providers. As said, speaking truth to power has its consequences, and that is what much of this book is about.

I approached the girls' home on a narrow road parallel to a stream and crossed a small bridge and entered the large wide Preda compound. I parked and stood looking at the children's home with some satisfaction that, with much help, I had built in the shape of an octagon. It is a safe haven for a community of an average of 65 girls, that are six to seventeen years old, recovering, healing, and being empowered after the trauma and hardship of human trafficking and child sexual abuse. It is the only such Emotional Release Therapeutic healing home in the Philippines for girls. There are two similar homes for boys: one in Zambales about twenty kilometers away and one in Cebu. Both are in peaceful, scenic locations. A group of about six children came running out of the open glass doors laughing and waving as they greeted me and led me inside.

There were groups of girls doing various tasks in preparation for the celebration and the arrival of the guests. We had invited supportive parents, friends, supporters, social workers, prosecutors, judges, and ambassadors. The girls were alive, happy, and full of fun, and they inspired all those who met them. Not all are totally free from the burden of the abuse they suffered, especially those who find little or no support from their non-supportive family members who chose to support their abusers. If they were not at Preda, they would be prevented by the relatives of the accused from filing a complaint with the prosecutor.

The total support and the welcome they receive at the Preda home helps lift the dark sadness. They feel safe and secure, accepted

and understood. The Emotional Release Therapy frees them from that hurt, anger, and pain, and in time they become self-confident and outspoken empowered young children. This is a unique and special community of children emerging from a dark past of suffering and recovering from the pain of sexual exploitation and neglect by parents, relatives, and abusers. And they are healing and growing stronger day by day.

A greater day of freedom and justice is when their abuser is convicted.

Inside the spacious octagon building, the staff and children were busy making preparations for the celebration. Some were laying out the tables and others were hanging decorations. There was a group of teenage boys that had come over from the boys' home, a twenty-minute drive away, who were practicing their dance moves for the cultural show later – they too, were victims of abuse, physical, emotional, and some suffered sexual abuse. Some of them had been illegally detained and suffered torture in jail cells but were set free by the Preda Foundation social workers. They too were being healed and empowered through the Emotional Release Therapy and the pain, anger, and powerless frustration they felt against their jailers and abusers. Now, they are free of their anger and are on the way to a better, happier, successful life. We had a lot of successful lives to be thankful for and celebrate. It was a happy day for me.

This story is about these children and youth, their individual struggles, and the legal battles they fought to get justice against human traffickers and their sexual abusers. It's about their many emotional and legal victories that gave them a new and peaceful life of freedom. Hundreds of other children and youth have been healed and reintegrated to safe families, and many have finished high school and college in the Preda aftercare support program. It is also the story of the dedicated and hardworking Preda staff, led by Francisco Bermido Jr., who made Preda's success his goal in life. This story tells how brave Filipinos stood together and confronted the sex industry and the Olongapo City authorities that gave operating permits and licenses for the brothels to operate with impunity and held thousands

of women and underage girls in debt bondage unable to leave or escape. This was promoted to satisfy the US servicemen from the US military bases at Subic Bay and Clark airbase in Pampanga. They were in the Philippines since 1898 but expanded greatly to support the US troops during the Korean War, through the Vietnam War, until they were closed in 1992.

That remarkable historical event has special meaning for us at Preda as we were instrumental in striking the spark that lit the fire that grew into a conflagration of a nationwide anti-bases campaign. The spark was struck by chance when the Olongapo City authorities threatened to close the Preda children's home because of disclosures I made in the press about the abuse of 12 young girls, the youngest being a 9-year-old victimized by US servicemen. Only one suspect was identified and brought to trial in Guam. I told the media in a press conference that it was better to close the bases and convert them to economic zones and free the women in debt bondage and give them jobs with dignity. That statement unexpectedly became a headline and led to a successful campaign that went national. The public sentiment turned in favor of closure and conversion of the US bases. The public mood empowered and persuaded the Philippine Senate to vote 'no' to a new military bases treaty with the United States, and the bases closed down in 1992.

Much has changed since then with the former US military bases; now, a thriving commercial free port hums of industry. There are now dark clouds gathering, and concern about the return of a greater commercial sex industry since the US military returned in force in 2014 when President Benigno Aquino III signed the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) allowing them to set up US facilities inside nine Philippine military facilities. All this to deter China's threats to invade Taiwan. Now, there is a standoff between the US Navy and the Chinese navy in the South China Sea, as China claims the West Philippine Sea as its own and confrontations with patrol boats are becoming more frequent. The Philippine bases – now with US locations within – are equipped with long-range US

missile launchers, making the Philippines a target for Chinese attack in any military confrontation over Taiwan.

The situation is growing tense as the US military stash hardware in the Philippine bases and plan to build a munitions factory in the Subic Bay Freeport. As more US servicemen are assigned to the Philippines, the danger of a resurgence of the sex industry looms. What we strove for could well be undone. Here is my story from the beginning, and it's not over.



CHAPTER ONE

Arriving in the Philippines in September 1969

When I first arrived in the Philippines from Ireland in September 1969, I got a taxi from the airport to the Columban House on Singalong Street in the Malate district. Then it was a quite leafy suburb. I was welcomed by the Columban Fathers and assigned a room by Pedro, a friendly, helpful Filipino employee. Pedro made me feel welcome. I immediately embraced the warm tropical climate and plunged into the swimming pool. I chatted with fellow Columbans sipping cold beer and juice on the balcony. Within days I was assigned by the Columban regional director to St. Joseph's Church in Olongapo City. Strangely, I was not given a mission briefing or orientation or any information about language studies. I asked the regional director at the time, "What will I do there?" He answered, "Don't worry, you will find out when you arrive there; just do what you think is best." With that instruction, I set off to Olongapo City, 129 kilometers north of Manila.

It was a long drive from Manila in a little Volkswagen Beetle with Father Bill Sullivan, who was returning to Olongapo City. We drove through the verdant rice fields of central Luzon, where Father Bill pointed out along the roadside monuments to the victims of the Bataan Death March of WWII. As many as 78,000 American and Filipino war prisoners captured by the Imperial Japanese Army were marched from Bataan to Camp O'Donnell, a concentration camp 105 kilometers away in Capas, Tarlac. Hundreds of weak and wounded soldiers fell and died along the way. It was a sad introduction to a

chapter of Filipino history that many preferred to forget. I was determined to learn more about the history of this country, once ruled by the Spanish until 1898, then by the Americans until 1946, and now by the Filipinos themselves.

Then, after a bumpy journey over potholed roads, three hours later, the little Beetle was winding its way over the hills on a bumpy, narrow zigzag road down towards Olongapo City beside Subic Bay. Father Bill explained it was more like a large town with a single main road from the City Hall to the entrance of the United States Subic Bay Naval Station about three kilometers away. That was my introduction to the reality that Olongapo was the rest and recreation town for the US 7th Fleet in the Pacific. We circled a roundabout with a monument displaying the head of a native warrior. The name of the city derived from the Tagalog words “Ulo ng Apo,” meaning the head of an indigenous native chieftain. One minute later we drove through the gates of St. Joseph's Catholic Church. On the left of the compound was the large church with open doors along the side, and on the right was a long school building and, at the end, the parish rectory. I entered the rectory, and on the second floor in a spacious dining room, I was introduced to the three other Columban priests assigned to this busy parish. It had three masses daily and six on a Sunday. Two were celebrated in English and one in Filipino, known as Tagalog—the principal language of about 184 in all.

The church pews were half full most days, as the Filipinos are very devout traditional Catholics; on a Sunday, it was standing room only. I learned that there was a large group of babies to be baptized every Sunday. Filipinos love large families, encouraged by the Catholic Church. Besides normal parish duties like school confessions and marriage interviews, which I skipped as I had no language studies in Filipino, mass was mostly celebrated in English. I was asked by the Columban sisters to help teach English and “religion” to the D class in the parish high school just beside the rectory. There were about 800 students in all in the school and about thirty students in each class. The students were my first group of

Filipinos with whom I had a face-to-face personal encounter. Unlike most Filipino students who are eager to learn and are devoted to their studies, the D class consisted of students that were unruly, rebellious, disturbed, and troublesome. I was eager to get to know them, a mixed class of boys and girls, and to understand their lives. I was twenty-six years of age at the time. I was frustrated, as it was very difficult to teach English or religion, as I had no Filipino and no training as a teacher.

In the seminary in Dalgan Park, in Navan, Ireland, I was taught academic subjects like theology, scripture, and canon law. We learned no skills other than to celebrate mass and give a sermon from a pulpit. In St. Joseph's parish I learned how to baptize a child in ten minutes of practice. I was soon skilled in blessing vehicles that stood with their bonnets open after mass every day.

So, I improvised and organized class discussions in basic English and with the help of a student as translator. I used lots of pictures cut from magazines, and we discussed some values like love, friendship, relationships, and family. They got interested and had many lively discussions, mostly in Filipino. I felt I was doing something useful that would help them in life. That's how I learned about their lives and their serious family problems. Some of the students had been abandoned by their parents due to broken homes. Some were living under the care of a single mother. Some were rebellious, angry, and hurt youths. They were angry at the world and felt their family and society had failed them and offered them nothing but a dead-end life in a society that was host to a large number of brothels, sex bars, and clubs.

This was the main industry in Olongapo City that was an eye-opener for me, a newcomer to such a world of vice and exploitation that catered to the recreational and sexual demands of the US servicemen. They left the base and their ships and thronged the streets and bars every night on a kilometer-long nightclub strip. The temptations of the sex industry caused the students' parents to break up, and many of their fathers had girlfriends or had new families.

Several students lived with a single parent or a relative or with a grandparent or lived in a friend's house. In the first weeks I had no idea of what went on in the city's red-light district. I had not gone out of the church compound other than to drive to another parish or to Iba in the north for a monthly meeting in the bishop's house. I was determined to find out more about what was going on in the town that caused this anger and family disruption among many students.



CHAPTER TWO

A visit to the Red-light district

One afternoon before sunset, I decided to walk across town to the parish rectory of St. Columban's Church. This was situated near the entrance to the US Naval Station. Dressed in casuals, I took a short "jeepney" ride into the heart of the so-called "Sin City." The long street was lined with sex bars that began right outside the gate of the US Navy Base. The nightclub strip called Magsaysay Drive was blazing with neon lights. Loud bands were pounding out rock 'n' roll from bars and clubs on the strip. The Beatles' hit Get Back was vying with The Rolling Stones' Honky Tonk Women and Judy in Disguise (With Glasses) by John Fred & His Playboy Band. The street was thronged with American sailors, all barhopping, leading very young girls by the hand to a cheap hotel or even carrying the small girls thrown over their shoulders like a sack of potatoes. The teenage girls were laughing and giggling; they looked no more than fifteen or sixteen years old.

The sailors were tall, muscular, and macho; they walked about as if they owned the street, shouting obscenities to each other, waving beer bottles, and grabbing the young girls who stood in the doorways of the sex bars and clubs made up with mascara to look like adults. Welcome signs and banners greeted these high-paying customers: "Welcome USS Enterprise," said one. At the doors of the sex clubs, under the flickering neon lights, the older women disguised their hard life of exploitation and abuse behind masks of heavy makeup, artificial eyelashes, and mascara highlighted by red burnished cheeks. They lounged in sexually provocative poses. Beside them were their

young trainees, these young childlike girls on offer to the highest-paying customer.

“Hi Joe, want a good time? Joe, come on in; I give you special job, Joe!” they called out. Every male foreigner was called Joe, as in GI Joe. “You want a cherry girl?”—that’s what they called a virgin. The customer would pay a very big price for a genuine “cherry girl.” Of course there were none. If a sailor stopped, his privates were given an instant massage, a sample of more to come. Prudently, I kept to the curbside. The women and young girls were mostly from the far-flung rural provinces where their brothers, sisters, and parents lived in dire poverty, suffering from disease, malnutrition, and neglect. Here they only had their bodies to sell and send money to their hungry families and pay their unending debts to the bar owners. They were trapped in debt bondage, a form of slavery. They couldn’t leave the bar until they had paid off the loan which continually piled up; there was no way out.

I walked towards the bridge that separated the city from the base. Groups of Filipinos were crossing over to work in the naval yard or offices, and groups of boisterous sailors were coming out. Both groups had their own night shift. Smart uniformed Marines wearing yellow helmets manned a barrier at the entrance. They checked everyone’s pass or ID card. On the Olongapo side of the bridge, a group of hopeful streetwalkers beamed practiced smiles and waved to the approaching sailors coming off duty. It would be a night to remember.

Down a side street on my right, fifty meters from the nightclub scene, was St. Columban’s Church. High school and college students in uniforms of green skirts and white blouses, together with churchgoers, were hurrying to the church with bowed heads and averted eyes to join evening prayer, where the rosary was being prayed. It was surreal that a Catholic church, school, and college floated like an island of sanity in a lake of sex bars and brothels. A wild street party was blaring rock music only a hundred meters away. This clash of cultures and values was tolerated and even accepted by

the clergy and local authorities as normal, it seemed, without comment or criticism; such was life.

I followed the people into the church, and finally the raucous noise of the street and rock band fell away to a distant annoyance, and it was strangely quiet. Inside the entrance at the back, a large crucifix stood with the impaled figure of the crucified Christ. I wondered what He would say about all this contradiction as I sat on a church bench and recovered from the cultural shock I had just experienced. Serious questions were forming in my mind and troubling my heart. What should our Christian response be to the human degradation and exploitation of entrapped women and children in a modern Sodom and Gomorrah? A young woman, flashily dressed, stood at the large cross with the crucified Christ. Her small hand rested on his nailed feet; she was deep in prayer. She appeared to be on her way to work. Was it to be in a bar? Was she praying not to be abused or raped? I wondered. She could have been a cashier, a waitress, or a sex worker. For sure she worked to feed a hungry family, pay debts, and just to stay alive. Not all women were sex workers, but many were, and they had been trafficked by pimps and sold to club owners and were trapped in debt slavery. There was no escape, it seemed.

After a thoughtful reflection in the relative quiet of St. Columban's Church, a refuge of peace from the madness that was erupting on the streets nearby, I walked back into the cultural chaos and down Magsaysay Drive towards St. Joseph's rectory, dodging the reaching hands and dismissing the calls of "Hi Joe, want a virgin?" and passed the bars with such names as California Jam, Sexton, Body Shaft, American Dream, Blow Heaven, and many more sex bars, all with operating licenses and permits issued by the city government, making it legal but not right. I was truly in "Sin City."

Suddenly I was bumped off the pavement by a group of shouting, shoving, semi-drunk US Marines as they pushed their way along the street. White-uniformed sailors with black batons and armbands that said "Shore Patrol" patrolled every hundred meters. The US Navy had an agreement with the city authorities that discipline of the unruly

marines and sailors on leave in the city would be taken into the custody of the Shore Patrol and the US Military Police. Philippine sovereignty was suspended for almighty America. The bunch of marines that had bullied their way along the street was now caught up in a fracas at the door of a club. They were fighting, kicking, punching, and swearing until the Shore Patrol came running and bundled them into a wire cage on the back of a pickup and sped away across the bridge into “Little America.” What I saw exploding on the street was the pent-up anger, hurt, and trauma experienced by these young men at the horrors of a bitter, bloody war in the jungles of Vietnam, to which they would be soon returning and may not survive.

As I hurried back to the rectory of St. Joseph’s, I observed more of street life in Olongapo, far from the comfort of the church rectory. Impoverished middle-aged women with young kids were selling single cigarettes to jeepney drivers. They offered me sticks of gum and roasted peanuts. Women wrapped in gaudy aprons barbecued bananas and chicken legs on smoking charcoal braziers along the footpath. They polluted the air with the acrid smell of burning kerosene, fat, and garlic that stung my eyes and nostrils. Open-fronted shops displayed rows of thick studded leather belts, sunglasses, vicious-looking knives, baseball caps (even one with a swastika), and T-shirts with pornographic images mouthing obscenities. There was the cynical with the obscene.

Street children, boys and girls, six to about twelve years of age, were running about barefoot or with flip-flops in dirty T-shirts and ragged shorts, begging and hustling tips from the sailors. Some kids followed me along the street.



CHAPTER THREE

A Challenge to My Faith

I returned to the rectory of St. Joseph's and went into the quiet of the large church. I tried to process my "cultural shock," the experience of a night on the "strip," as it was called. I was exasperated, feeling a mixture of anger and frustration at this situation, and felt it was just accepted by everyone since no one commented on it in the rectory.

I began to question my judgmental attitude. Was I misjudging the social situation, being overcritical, and being self-righteous? This was perhaps just the way of the world everywhere, I reasoned, and I just had to adapt and accept it as reality. "You will get used to it," I told myself. Then I asked myself what our task as missionaries here was: to accept a bad situation or try to change it for the good. Were we called to be prophets, to free the slaves, or to be the silent witnesses to perpetual unrepentant social sin, abuse, and exploitation?

No one, not even the clergy, seemed to question the negative impact of the military base and the sex industry on the young people of Olongapo and the fact that the local government was providing a brothel town for the soldiers and sailors of the United States. I buried my critical thoughts and feelings at that time and accepted that there was nothing I could do just then. I believed that I could help the students find a better life for themselves. In St. Joseph's parish, I felt a bit rebellious myself, being frequently assigned by the parish priest to the hot, airless confessional with mostly sinless penitents murmuring words I could hardly understand. The teachers marched children from the school to the confessional once a week, where they, in their utter innocence, thought eating a biscuit without permission

or saying bad words was a sin—the result of Catholic teaching on sin. The real sinners were politicians, drug traffickers, and pimps. Illegal drugs were peddled outside the school gates and sometimes inside. The Olongapo clergy did not notice the encroaching tide of social sin lapping the walls of the church compound.

I decided to focus on helping the students, the most needy people that I could help. The students in class D were bright, intelligent teenagers, yet their simmering emotional tensions prevented them from showing interest in learning. They needed to solve family and emotional problems within their broken families. They had low self-esteem, and then low school grades reinforced that perception. In our discussion groups they shared their deepest hurt of verbal, physical, emotional, or sexual abuse in their family. I was being educated as never before on the inner lives of the teenage youth. This would serve me well in the future when I found ways to help them all the better. I had cast aside the long white clerical cassock we were supposed to wear everywhere. So, I dressed as the youth did, in blue jeans and short-sleeve shirts. My fellow clergy were not pleased; I was not conforming to tradition, and I was drifting away from the clan. My short, challenging sermons during Mass were frowned upon by my fellow priests, as I was telling gospel stories in a way that was critical of the political system and human exploitation in the city.

One Sunday I gave a homily about how Jesus of Nazareth drove the traders out of the temple courtyard and confronted the high priests for allowing the holy temple courtyard to be used as a marketplace for sacrificial animals and money changers. The priests prospered financially from this business. I asked the congregation if there could be any comparison with what was going on in the city, with many young people being exploited in clubs and bars. Was it not a human trading place also? “What would Jesus do?” I asked the congregation. I was met with stunned silence; apparently no one had ever challenged the status quo before.

However, some politicians had taken note.



CHAPTER FOUR

Students Rescued from Death Squad, Extrajudicial Killing

Some of the students in St. Joseph's and other schools and colleges redirected their frustration, pain, and anger at the regime of President Marcos Sr. They joined a "flash" rally against his government, and four were identified and arrested by the Marcos military. This was before the declaration of martial law. Some of their classmates rushed to tell me what happened. They said the three students had been taken to the City Jail in Barrio Barretto, about six kilometers from the school. I called some teachers to plan what we could do to help them. We feared that they would be shot and killed since Marcos had death squads to silence protest.

We immediately hurried to the jail and pleaded with the police station commander to release the three students to our custody. He played tough; he said they were suspected rebels and would be charged with subversion. That charge had more or less a twenty-year sentence or extrajudicial execution. I had a moment of inspiration and offered to take personal custody of them in St. Joseph's Church. He thought about that and said we could come back in three days, as he would first consult with his higher superiors. I thought that was just a ploy, as more likely he was looking for a bribe. After three days we went back and brought several bags of groceries and food snacks for the prisoners. When he saw all the bags of food, he had a change of heart and agreed to release the four students to our custody, and he kept the groceries. "For the prisoners," he said. Perhaps he thought there was something else of more value in the shopping bags. There was nothing more than groceries; he was surely disappointed. We brought the students to St. Joseph's. They were very scared teenagers,

and they showed me the bruises and marks of abuse on their arms. I did not confront the police for the brutality at that time, but I vowed on another day I would. We were lucky to get them out alive. I then brought them back to their families and advised that they get away to their relatives in a far province. They did and survived and never came back until years later to say thanks. This was my first jail rescue of children and youth; there were many more to come.

More students were at risk. Pedro was 16 and collapsed behind the school building one evening from a drug overdose. If it were discovered, he could be expelled from school, and if the Marcos authorities knew, he could even be charged as a drug dependent, or even a pusher, all considered serious crimes. With the two teachers, I took him in a taxi to a beach resort and rented a cottage where he could sleep it off and recover. We contacted his family to care for him until he could go home. I began thinking of where I could protect the other students that had been arrested and held in jail and could be executed. If I could get them out of police custody, that would be progress.

Drug use was widespread in the city, and HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases were spreading. The city had set up compulsory testing centers with financing by the US naval station commander to check the sex workers for infections. The mayor wanted to keep the sailors disease-free as ordered by the fleet commanders. In fact, many servicemen and marines had venereal disease themselves and were spreaders. Years later, when women or girls were found positive for HIV, they were treated as if they were criminals and were forcibly sent for treatment to the San Lazaro hospital in Manila. The victims were devastated; they lost their jobs and still had their debts to pay. The city was in effect under the control of the US Naval Station commander. He could close the gate anytime and stop servicemen from going out and shut down the entire business community for as long as he wanted. That was the power he had, and the city authorities knew it and always complied with his commands.

The Philippine anti-drug laws were harsh and punitive, and these draconian laws punished drug users for possession of small amounts of marijuana with long prison sentences, while the drug traffickers were in cahoots with police and bribed their way out of criminal charges. The age of criminal liability at that time for a child was 9 years old. Then 12-year-old kids were jailed in the same cells as adults. There was much sexual abuse of children in prison cells. Years later I began a mission to get them out. I considered teenage drug taking to be self-medication for the pain of childhood physical and sexual abuse, neglect, poverty, and a feeling of being abandoned and worthless. Alcohol and drugs, dangerous and addictive, were the only painkillers for emotional pain they knew, not unlike the victims of the fentanyl epidemic nowadays. The authorities considered them criminals even when they were only 9-12 years old. In future years I campaigned with other rights advocates to successfully change this law. I knew they were in need of healing and support, not punishment. Youth that were suspects of rebellion were in danger of arrest and summary execution, wrongly branded as communist subversives. I rented a beach cottage and let the students use it until they could get away to a distant province. I didn't fully realize I could have been charged with aiding and abetting the escape of wanted fugitives. I kept this protective activity a secret from all.

With poverty and economic disaster raging in the Philippines due to the plunder of President Ferdinand Marcos Sr., drug abuse was on the rise due to childhood abuse, joblessness, poverty, despair, and drug dependency. My life in Olongapo and the challenges faced by the students brought me face-to-face with the social problems and injustices that were widespread and that disturbed the young people. There were no jobs for them, only poverty and broken families.

I began to have a social awakening to the inequality and widespread social injustice and the social sin that was dominating life in this Catholic country. I asked myself what kind of Christianity I was a part of that allowed a brothel city to exploit hundreds of women and children without question. When I felt depressed, I asked myself

if this was the place for me. I had achieved very little. For my fellow clergy, success was measured by the diocesan annual total of the number of masses said, baptisms done, funerals conducted, confessions heard, hospital visits, and vehicles and tricycles blessed. I wondered if it was time for me to look for a new assignment to another part of the Philippines.



CHAPTER FIVE

Discovering liberation theology

I was encouraged by the missionary action in other parts of the Philippines that gave me great hope of meaningful evangelization. Missionary groups like my Columban brothers and sisters in Negros Island were forming Christian communities that were self-sustainable, based on members helping each other, protecting each other, and working together for social justice. I became very interested and wondered if I could be part of that movement, although in Olongapo or Zambales there was no knowledge about it. Columban Fathers Brian Gore, Niall O'Brien, Michael Martin, Rufus Halley, and many others were leading the formation of the progressive Basic Christian Communities. (Father Rufus Halley was killed by armed men on 28 August 2001.) After I read about this pioneering work, I took a Victory Liner bus to Manila, and I attended a seminar about the heart of the Gospel message being about the liberation of the poor from injustice and poverty. I learned that Liberation Theology was about the life work of Jesus, and it is the Christian way to free and liberate the world from evil. Christians can find courage and strength together to oppose and fight against tyranny, oppression, exploitation, abuse, hypocrisy and corruption, land grabbing, and social injustice. The Basic Christian Community was about people standing together in solidarity, a different way of being an active Christian and doing all the good they can for the community and each other by working together. In remote areas the elected lay ministers conducted a prayer liturgy in the absence of an ordained priest.

During that seminar I learned the implication of the action of Jesus in Nazareth when he read the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah as recorded in the Gospel of St. Luke, chapter 4:16. That was an eye-opener for me when I learned that he took that prophecy on himself as a mission to the poor to proclaim liberty to the innocent captives, bringing recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed, and to announce that the time has come for the Lord to free and save his people. It suddenly came to life for me, and I felt I saw how I should live it. This was his mission for us: to continue and bring liberty to the poor and the enslaved. I had to choose to take a preferential option for the poor; this was the most important part, more important than serving the well-off and the rich. I was awakening to the realization that we priests were practicing and teaching a selfish kind of religion by encouraging people to attend the sacraments to get to heaven by prayer and church-going, giving alms and donations. But we were failing to have a faith that does good for the poor and oppressed people and opposes and moves mountains of evil. This was the mission that appealed to me, like organizing social justice and peace action groups and having a heartfelt commitment to help the poor and our suffering neighbors. Some of us had likely overlooked the story of the Good Samaritan or the words of Saint James, who wrote in the New Testament, "Faith without action is dead." When I looked at the human rights situation in the Philippines then in 1969 and later under harsh martial law and witnessed the exploitation of innocent children and women in the brothel business, I came to believe that real faith and my mission had to be the same as that of Jesus of Nazareth: to do all the good I could for the poor and oppose evil and wrongdoing in society as he did. I wanted my life mission to be like his: inspiring, encouraging, and organizing people to do justice for each other and being totally convinced that one day we will overcome evil and win.

I began to think about the situation in Olongapo City and also in nearby Angeles City, home of the US Air Force and a city with a big brothel industry too. I began to think that a lot of liberation was needed for the women and children locked in sex bars and in street

poverty in the police and military jails and victims of child abuse in their families. How could they be liberated and set free? was the question to be answered.

I learned too that was the mission of the early Christians, where they shared food and homes, and the People of God were united in helping each other. When persecution came, Christian solidarity was the only way for the people to survive by uniting together, believing they were doing what was right and just, and risking their own lives by saving their brothers and sisters. When Jesus read the scripture in the synagogue in Nazareth, he said Israel had to change, and that made the authorities angry, and they rejected him and his message and tried to throw him off a cliff. I asked myself what would happen to me if I took a similar idealist path and challenged the authorities. That is what I tried to do and was nearly “thrown off a cliff” a few times.



CHAPTER SIX

Learning from the poor and exploited

The new insight that the Gospel message was about bringing freedom to the poor and the oppressed people had a strong following in Negros Island and parts of Mindanao. The missionaries and local clergy were helping the remote Catholic communities to organize themselves to stand together to face down the injustice and oppression coming from the rich and the powerful land grabbers and mining corporations. The people were united in faith and challenging the wrongdoings of the logging and mining corporations that were taking their ancestral land and damaging the environment. People were coming together in faith and belief that the power of collective action for justice could confront evil and even, in some cases, overcome it. Catholicism was changing in parts of the world where people were suffering oppression and finding strength in following the words and actions of Jesus of Nazareth. The Christian liberation theology movement was moving people, like in the time of Jesus, from temple worship and hierarchical rule to community participation and solidarity for justice and truth. A move from the dominant sacramental theology to one where faith was primarily expressed in action for justice and freedom and communities were taking a stand for social justice, which they expressed in the Eucharist celebration, from which they drew strength and inspiration.

As in the time of Jesus, this kind of faith in action was not welcomed by institutional ritual-based religion and nowadays is not very much welcome either. It takes religious power from the altar to the community. It was vital and important to be part of the Eucharistic celebration with the people, as it is at the heart of the Basic Christian

Community. It is a meal of friendship with Jesus of Nazareth present to bind the community together to give everyone inspiration and courage to his followers to inspire them to act and bring the good news to each other and especially to the poor. It is reenacting the Last Supper, of course, and making him and his friendship present, and there with him, we can draw power and encouragement and find the courage to take action and stand with the exploited poor people for justice. His words and actions give an example to us and the people to empower them to stand as one to protect their rights in common unity. Every Christian community must be active in implementing his mission.

One experience after another shook me awake to the hard reality of life in Olongapo City. One evening walking to St. Columban's Church, I was accosted on the sidewalk by a man that had two young children with him standing in a doorway held by a woman; they looked about 11 or 12 years of age. "Hi Joe," he said. "You want a young girl? She will do anything you like; it costs a thousand pesos only." That was about twenty US dollars. I was shocked I realized he was offering the children for sexual abuse there on the street. "What you are doing is a crime, a terrible crime. Take those children back to their parents; I will call the police," I said angrily. He just laughed. "Ha ha, I am the police," he said. I did not know if that was a joke or the truth. He seemed so confident that he had connections to people in authority. It was my first experience of child trafficking, and I didn't know what to do. I stood there a bit shocked as he left with the two children and the woman. I was frustrated because I was unable to help those children, and I felt angry when I realized that such crimes of child trafficking were going on openly with impunity on the streets of the city. I wanted to be able to set those young children free and bring the trafficker to answer in a court of law. I wanted to do more to help the hundreds of victims that I now knew were held in sex bars and being abused and sold on the streets. What was more frustrating was I had no one to share my hopes and plans with and find someone to talk to that was willing to listen and offer advice. That was before

my fellow Columban Declan Coyle came to Olongapo City and we found common cause in working with the poor to alleviate their hardship. The priests in the rectory were much older than I and Declan. They had lived with the situation since their assignment many years previously and, like Bishop Henry Byrne, accepted it as it was, unchangeable. I had a different opinion, and I felt we should be doing something more.

What I understood was happening in Negros Island among the communities was a movement like that of Jesus of Nazareth, inspired by the progressive Columban missionaries. I wanted to be part of that movement and thought about requesting a reassignment there.

I was invited by one of the parishioners to visit and anoint a dying patient in the city hospital. I decided to visit the Olongapo Hospital and find out if I could help in any way, if only to bless and comfort the sick, anoint them, and tell them that they were loved and to ease their pain in some way. The hospital building was walking distance from the church. Entering that decrepit old city hospital, I was hit by the smell of sickness and of death too, and it followed me through the dirty corridors, growing stronger as I came to the bedsides of the unfortunate patients. One of the first patients I met was Angie Mendoza, a former sex worker. She was lying in a filthy bed; the mattress, a Navy throwaway, was stained with dried blood. A horrid smell pervaded the ward. I went from one patient to another praying and blessing them and sprinkling holy water to show them that they were holy and children of God. A sign that somebody cared and respected them all were very poor women patients. I had learned some phrases in Filipino and could say some words of comfort. Many of them I learned from a nurse that they were dying of the HIV-AIDS virus and had no family since they were migrants from distant provinces.

Angie told me her story in broken Filipino-English about how she came to Olongapo City. When she was a 15-year-old child, she had been taken into the palatial house of a big landowner on a sugar plantation near Kabankalan, on the Island of Negros, where

Columban Missionaries worked for many years, forming basic Christian communities among the poor.

Angie's parents were plantation workers in Negros, and her family of six lived in a shack on the edge of the plantation. They all worked day and night cutting and carrying long stalks of sugar cane to a waiting truck. It was backbreaking work for low wages. When Angie became a domestic servant in the house of the landlord, it was considered a great privilege and the envy of her siblings and neighbors. They didn't see her for months, but when they did, she had changed greatly. Her cheerful spirit was gone; she was quiet, submissive, and fearful and very much afraid to talk about her life in the big house.

Angie was too terrified at first to tell her experience, but one day at home in their shack, she broke down crying and blurted out how the owner and his son continually raped her. The threat to drive her family off the hacienda to starve was enough to seal her lips. These were the lords of lust that used fear and threats to control and dominate their servants and slaves. Slaves because many were in debts that they could never pay off; they received almost no pay due to pay deductions for the debt incurred for medical treatment when any one of their children was sick. They incurred debts when starvation was at the door. One day at sixteen, Angie was offered to work in a hotel by a recruiter that came to the plantation looking for teenagers.

The parents of Angie, desperate for money, for food, and for the other children, agreed and took an advance payment on her future wages. Angie was trafficked to a brothel in Olongapo City by her recruiter and was entrapped by debt owed to her trafficker, who had given money to her parents. The bar owner kept part of her low wage to pay for her board and lodging behind the bar and more contrived debts. She could not leave before paying all her "debts."

She was now about 30 years old, dying in a dirty hospital bed. She took my hand and asked me a shocking question. "Padre, have I lived a sinful life?" I was stunned and alarmed that she thought herself

to be a sinner. I answered, “No, you are a good person, you are loved by God, and you were shamefully abused and sinned against by others.” I sat on a plastic chair beside her bed. She turned to me and asked, “Padre, why did God abandon me to them when I was a child?” I was at first silent and disturbed by her profound question. I had no ready answer, no explanation other than to try and defend God, and I said, “No! God did not abandon you; the bad people that abused you, they rejected God, and they chose to do evil.” I looked at her, and I felt miserable and powerless to undo this incredible injustice and ease her suffering that was without end.

Angie was not alone; the ward was filled with women, some teenagers, that were wasted and dying of a disease linked to HIV/AIDS. Others were dying from infection because of botched abortions in makeshift illegal backstreet clinics. It was heartbreaking. I was feeling helpless and growing more angry at the causes and the people behind this human suffering: the plantation owners, traffickers, brothel owners, corrupt politicians, and uncaring clerics that enabled and even encouraged it to continue by silence and inaction. I prayed with the dying at their bedside and anointed their dry, wrinkled skin with holy oil to give them a mark of respect and dignity; I could only say a few words of comfort as a gesture of support. My words seem so empty. How to change this situation of injustice, exploitation, poverty, and neglect is what haunted me day after day when I left the hospital that was more like a dying house. I felt that giving words of comfort and blessings that brought no bodily relief, no healing of physical or emotional pain, no cure, and no change and no end to the pain and injustice was to be totally inadequate. Missionary priesthood and Catholicism, I came to realize, had to be more than saying a devotional mass, absolving children’s imagined sins, and blessing babies and vehicles in St. Joseph’s, for which they paid stipends and fees. Except for the confessions, they were free. After that hospital visit to those women dying in loneliness and abandonment, I had a deep feeling of just anger at this oppression of the poor that Jesus of Nazareth must have felt.

On another day, I was called out to a shack in a slum area to pray over a dead child, one of many, I later learned. A member of the Legion of Mary involved in charity work led me to a cluster of clapboard shacks that clung to the banks of the canal through which passed the city sewerage. There was garbage everywhere. This was a city dump too, and the shacks grew out of one another and leaned this way and that to stay upright. They staggered down to the black soup that filled the canal, and then hung out over that toxic brew; each hovel was perched dangerously on wobbly bits of wood. Children played in the mire and mud; many hardly more than five and six were furiously scratching at the piles of newly dumped garbage with sticks and metal hooks. Shifting, sorting, gathering, and sometimes finding something to eat. I had never seen or imagined anything like this place before. It was a horrid and disgusting situation of poverty and government neglect. There was no church mission to help them or challenge the causes of such poverty. Years later I was able to send paramedics there to provide medical aid.

The dead child's mother lived in a small shack; tin cans beaten flat and bits of broken plywood formed the walls, and rusty iron sheets and a plastic sheet formed the roof. A curtain of old sacks served for a door. I bent low to enter, and there was the smell of recent sickness and death. There was nothing in the shack other than a sheet of old, decaying plywood on bricks serving as a bed and, in a corner, a cooking pot, a cardboard box, and empty jam jars. The only possessions of the very poor. The impoverished mother of the dead child had the look of total defeat and sadness at the death of her child by events beyond her comprehension. Looking up at me, "I did what I could," she told me in Tagalog, translated by the parishioner. "There was no one to help; I had no money for medicine." The little girl was laid out in a box made of bits of scrap plywood, or was it a cardboard box? I can't remember. I visited many more after that in those days. Two blobs of cotton wool protruded from her little girl's nose. She had to be buried very soon. The dead child was amazingly dressed in a white dress, shining in the flickering light of penny candles. As I

drew closer, I saw it was a dress made of paper, a cut-out dress just laid over her body, a shroud looking like a first communion dress that she would never wear. The child's toenails were freshly painted with cheap red nail varnish given by a neighbor, no doubt—the last gesture of a mother's love. The child had died of chronic diarrhea and dehydration, the last phase of death by malnutrition. She starved to death in this fat city of incredible excess and vice.

Another day at St. Joseph's Church, I was called out of the confessional to the rectory meeting room. It was a young teenager. He told the sacristan he was a runaway and that he wanted to make his last confession. He looked troubled, withdrawn, and stressed. I asked him his name; Francisco, he was 16, he said, looking at the floor. "Why is this to be your last confession?" I asked concerned. He was hugging a cardboard shoebox as if it contained his most precious possession. "Too many problems, Padre; forgive me first, please, so I do not go to hell when I kill myself," he said slowly in good English. I was somewhat shocked at this threat of suicide. "Tell me what happened. What is your problem? You can trust me." He remained silent. Then he looked up, and I could see pleading in his eyes. I wondered what his trouble was and how I could help. I persuaded him to open the shoebox, and I saw the handgun. "Oh God," I prayed, "don't let him grab it and use it." Then he told his story.

"My father beats me, and he beats my mother too; we are always frightened of him. When I was small, 6 years old, he put me in a sack and hung me up and beat me with a stick," he said. "He has abandoned us for another woman, and she hates us, and I hate him," he said.

I told Francisco I understood and would find a safe place for him to stay away from the abusive father, and I wondered where that could be. There was no safe place for him except to stay in the rectory waiting room. Why was there no safe place in the city to help runaway children? They have only the streets and doorways for a home or under a bridge, and they live and survive on the streets.

Then I asked him to give me the gun, and I promised I would persuade his father not to punish him but to understand and love him.

Francisco began to cry, and he released his grip on the box, and I slowly took it from him. He then told me his father was a military officer and a strict disciplinarian. The gun was his father's. I stayed with him in the waiting room and gave him food and drink from the refrigerator in the dining area. I brought the gun to the room of the parish priest for safekeeping. Then later that day the father showed up with a military escort, and the parish priest took over and returned the gun to him. After that, without any discussion or counseling, he gave a very scared Francisco to his father. They left that same afternoon. The boy seemed terrified and helpless. I had failed him, being unable to talk to the father, having promised the boy to intervene. I felt deep disappointment and annoyance with the parish priest for doing nothing to help Francisco and preventing me from talking to the father, which was so necessary. The boy was likely to suffer more beatings and punishment. We had to learn to do better than return him to an abusive parent.

The vast majority of good, generous, self-sacrificing Filipinos are doing all they can to love, protect, and educate their children. They reach out to help the poor and work for a better, happier, more just Philippines. However, they were not organized to do greater good and stand against corruption and bring Gospel values as a force in society and change the political and economic status quo. Catholicism was mostly focused on the rites and rituals and had lost the focus of the Gospel to act for social justice. That's why the sex industry, exploiting the poor, continued unchallenged. Powerful dynastic families aligned with the Marcos clan ruled the nation and downed the opposition. The committed Christians that protested the social injustice were, and still are, harassed, arrested, and imprisoned for their commitment to the poor and working for political change. Their work, like the mission of Jesus of Nazareth, is a threat to the ruling powers. They are branded rebels, as Jesus was, and some are killed for their activism for justice and taking sides with the poor. In the years to come I was to meet and team up with many of these brave and courageous Filipino Christians and non-Christians.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Language school and assignment to San Marcelino

After almost six months in Olongapo, I was allowed to study Tagalog at a school in Antipolo outside Manila. There were three teachers; each had their own methods that were conflicting. After six months there I had not learned very much except to play basketball. Six students around a basketball net helped pass the dreary days and shake off frustrations.

At least I had learned much about the challenges facing the Filipino youth from my six months of shocking experiences in Olongapo. The director of the Columbians in the Philippines assigned me back to Zambales province. This time to San Marcelino, a country town an hour's drive from Olongapo City. However, Ilokano is the spoken language there, yet many also speak Tagalog. It would be a challenge. I thought it was going to be boring in this sleepy, unchanging provincial town, but I was wrong; adventures lay ahead.

The old wooden rectory had an upper floor of polished mahogany boards and stood beside a solid church with a roof of galvanized iron sheeting. In front of the church was a wide plaza, dotted with a scattering of shady trees. A circular bandstand stood in the center. To the left in the church compound is the parish school, Saint William's, and outside the perimeter wall of the school is the bustling public market. Across the plaza on the other side of the main road is the town hall. The greater part of the municipality of San

Marcelino reached many kilometers to the east, where the Zambales mountains harbored bandits.

The pace of life in San Marcelino was turtle-like compared to that of St. Joseph's Parish in Olongapo City. I spent my first few weeks visiting the sick around the town and getting to know the people. They were kind and friendly, and they had great respect for their priests. I drove the catechists to the distant village schools to give their Catholic religious instruction. Outside the rectory compound was the market, and the day began at four o'clock with the squealing of pigs being brought to market strapped to the sidecar of motorized tricycles. Their engines spluttered angrily as they rattled their way under my window, with the screeching pigs making further sleep impossible.

Father Vincent Lyons, the parish priest, was a good, dedicated priest of the old tradition and a pleasant gentleman and a devoted Irish Columban missionary. He was my guide and mentor of sorts in adapting to the rural parish. We took turns in celebrating the daily Mass at 7 AM, and after I made a visit to the school, I asked the principal if there was anything I could do to help the students; there was none. I went to village schools with the head catechist to arrange for the catechists to visit and teach Catholic doctrine and moral values. The school was the best place for me to meet the teachers and try to converse with them in Tagalog. Besides that, and some Sunday baptisms, there was not much more parish activity. There were few vehicles to bless here. My hopes of working in the Olongapo slums and organizing Basic Christian Communities were on hold.

I soon learned that San Marcelino was a friendly, sleepy, but dangerous town. The good people are known for being honest, hardworking, thrifty, and insular, and many were Catholic, although there was also a large community of Christians of the Philippine Independent Church (PIC), in Spanish: Iglesia Filipina Independiente (IFI), also called the Aglipayan Church. This Filipino independent church was established in 1902 by a group of Catholic Filipino priests led by Father Gregorio Aglipay and Don Isabelo de los Reyes that

broke away from the Spanish-dominated Catholic Church because they made allegations of racism, abuse, injustices, and superstition in the institutional church. In April 1948 they received the apostolic succession from the Episcopal Church in the United States of America. The Philippines became an American colonial country in 1898.

There is a kind of rivalry between the churches, which was a bit upsetting during my time there. During the Holy Week processions of religious statues by both congregations around the town, they were clashing while vying for the best routes. The center of life for everyone is caring for their families, fulfilling traditional obligations, and maintaining good relationships. Outside of that, alliances with other families for marriage, business, and politics were of the greatest importance. Government people, unless they were relatives, were not totally trusted. There was little trust in the incredibly slow system of justice in resolving disputes. There was a buried tendency to violence that surfaced from time to time. A personal or family affront, insult, abuse, or a land dispute or political difference was frequently settled with the knife or the gun. Family feuds were common. Despite the sleepy atmosphere, the occasional sound of gunshots was not unusual. Many people had a gun at home to protect themselves and their families or settle scores in a shootout.

The first experience of San Marcelino was rural tranquility. That quickly changed when the sudden crack of gunshots woke me in the middle of the night to indicate there would soon be another funeral. One day the students came running across the schoolyard to announce that there were dead bodies in front of the Town Hall. I went with them and saw six bloodied corpses riddled with bullet holes lying on the pavement in front of the police station. It was the first time I had seen a dead human that was not in a coffin. It was unsettling seeing them thrown there like dead animals on the pavement. Was the display a warning to others? The police told me that they were Huks, or communist rebels, killed in a shoot-out with the army.

This undignified display of human corpses from some distant battlefield in the mountains was appalling. Flies buzzed about the bodies, their blood-splattered faces twisted and broken. The bullet holes were black and putrid. No one claimed the bodies, and they were not brought to the church. There was to be no funeral, which was the ultimate gesture of contempt for an enemy.

I silently prayed over the corpses and gave a blessing to acknowledge their human dignity. I wondered if they had committed any crime at all. I thought they might have been executed. An hour later the bodies were thrown into the back of an army truck like sacks of rice, and they were driven away. Later, they would be buried in unmarked graves. I felt nauseated and sick and went back to the rectory to rest and drink water. The tropical sun beat down as I crossed the dusty plaza; the smell of the decaying bodies followed me like a haunting cloud, reminding me of my visits to the pungent, decaying Olongapo City hospital.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Social Unrest: Pope Paul IV Attacked in Manila, Farmers Killed

January 1970 began with more social unrest in Manila and a violent demonstration by two thousand people outside the Palace gates where President Ferdinand Marcos Sr. resided. There was no television in San Marcelino, and we relied on radio and the newspapers, which arrived almost a day late by bus from Manila. The students in Manila were protesting rising prices, school fees, inequality, and social injustice. Columbans there were organizing Student Catholic Action groups to protest against social injustice and take a stand with the poor.

On February 18, 1970, a crowd of almost three thousand young people demonstrated in Manila against the Vietnam War and the use of US bases like Subic Bay in Olongapo City and the US Clark Air Force Base in Angeles City, 60 kilometers away in central Luzon. They were used to launch bombing runs against the Vietnamese and Cambodian people. We did not know that Laos was also being secretly bombed from Clark US Air Force Base in Pampanga. It seemed the money moguls behind the arms industry were pushing for more bombing of the Asian nations. The demonstrations against the Vietnam War continued sporadically in Manila through April that year, and on April 7 there was a general strike against the increase in oil prices. The street demonstrations against Marcos became more frequent throughout the year. The political situation was getting tense, and opposition to Marcos was growing. Allegations of corruption and looting of the treasury were common.

On November 27 that year, the priests and Bishop Henry Byrne, along with busloads of teachers and students, went off to Manila to greet Pope Paul VI. I was scheduled to supervise youth seminars and take care of the parish, so I missed the historical occasion. The speech of Pope Paul VI was nothing radical and not as hard-hitting as that of his successor, which was made some years later. Still, it gave a lot of encouragement to those in the church to work harder for social justice. The super-rich family dynasties still had all the wealth, and they had no intention of sharing it with the poor. Social equality was not on anyone's agenda except the impoverished and their defenders and supporters.

Pope Paul VI called on Marcos to work for a just division of wealth to uplift the poor and to respect human rights. However, Marcos continued to enrich himself, allegedly stashing away millions of dollars abroad; he was already growing rich, powerful, and autocratic. The poor were left on the road to economic ruin. He was accumulating gold, and his wife, Imelda, was collecting diamonds—and shoes. She had no sensitivity to the contradiction of being photographed kneeling in prayer holding a dangling rosary made of priceless diamonds, while outside the walls thousands of impoverished people dangled between life and death.

When Pope Paul VI arrived at the Manila airport and was being greeted by President Marcos and his wife, Imelda, there was a serious absence of security, and a mentally disturbed Bolivian painter, 35-year-old Benjamin Mendoza, disguised as a priest, attacked Pope Paul VI with a knife and stabbed him in the chest, shouting, “Death to superstition!” It was not a deadly, life-threatening wound. He was blocked from striking again by the Pope’s personal secretary, Pasquale Macchi, who pushed Mendoza to the ground. A journalist from the Manila Chronicle, Alex Allan, then jumped on Mendoza, subduing him, and with a police general dragged Mendoza away, Italian TV footage showed.

However, the official story that Marcos insisted upon was that he blocked Mendoza himself and Imelda picked up the knife. The

assassin Benjamin Mendoza was forced to sign a statement that Marcos had blocked him with a karate chop. The fact that Pope Paul VI was wounded was denied by the Vatican; the truth was not released until after his death in 1978.

This incident got more of the media's attention, and any impact of the Pope's later message calling for social justice and a fair distribution of wealth was overshadowed. The social unrest caused more human rights violations, and these incidents were being widely reported. Christians and non-Christians from the environment protection groups and indigenous people working for social justice were labeled rebels, communists, and enemies of the people and targeted for assassination by Marcos.

Then as now, the mission to serve the poor and help them organize themselves into strong, value-based faith communities was and is the way forward. This is what my fellow Columban Missionaries were doing on Negros Island and in parts of Mindanao: they were working for the liberation of the oppressed and exploited people from injustice. Some years later the Basic Christian Community became a powerful movement among the rural poor that sustained them, and the members were upholding moral values and social justice in the small towns and remote villages. The spiritual leaders of these small communities were dedicated to working for social justice and land reform, and the landlords saw them as threats to their wealth and power.

The few emaciated bodies of so-called rebels that I had seen in front of the town hall that morning in San Marcelino were later said to be former tenant farmers driven off their land by land-grabbing political families and had escaped to the mountains. They were impoverished and landless; they had opposed the government. Stories spread that they had surrendered with their antiquated guns but were executed almost immediately. Death squads were nothing new to the Philippines. The armed goons of a greedy landlord had likely driven them off the land so he could convert the area for corporate farming.



CHAPTER NINE

No to social action, sacramental theology, and the indigenous Aeta communities

Father Vincent Lyons was a good-natured, kind, and well-liked parish priest but very conservative. We never discussed social issues unless it meant a round of golf and a social dinner party. Besides celebrating the Eucharist and administering the sacraments, I wanted to do more in establishing small development projects in the remote Aeta villages, like buying hand pumps for the villages.

Sadly, I was not encouraged to get involved in social development projects to help the poor; the way of thinking then was backward and without understanding of the social teaching and mission of Christianity. That is done by implementing the Gospel values and uniting the people into empowering self-help communities inspired by the sharing of the Eucharist. In the conservative church it seemed that social work and uniting people was political and led to socialism, next to communism. That may be an exaggeration, of course; however, sacramental theology dominated. By participating in Mass and the sacraments, people could be saved and get to heaven. This kept the way to salvation strictly in the control and power of the clerics, the bishops, and the priests. The people were instructed to obey the institutional church and were not free to take mature responsibility for their own spiritual and community lives.

Years later, as more progressive teaching emerged, the Iba diocese did set up a Social Action Center. It was to deliver relief goods to villages hit by typhoons and natural disasters. Liberation theology was criticized as being political. The more assertive and proactive