

# To be Poor and Obscure

Versus to be rich and famous

I believe it is safe to say that a certain percentage among us would rather be rich and famous than poor and obscure. There are times when I for one daydream about CEO's life in corporate America or the taipans in Hong Kong, Singapore or Taipei. Or – with a touch of glamour – the elite of Hollywood.

Many times, when family and friends seek financial help, I would wish I had millions in the bank so I can easily issue a check. When NGO friends ask about funding possibilities for projects to alleviate poverty, I would wish I were a rich philanthropist who could easily give a big donation to charity. When frustrated at how critical issues are ignored by media, I would wish I had the fame of a Bono or Lady Di whose worldwide popularity guarantees media coverage for their advocacy on various issues.

The fact is that I am poor and obscure. When I joined the Redemptorists, I was ready to embrace the consequences of a vowed religious life, to live poor and, since I joined a missionary congregation life, to be in places where there was no choice but to be obscure.

Of course, these days becoming a religious does not mean one cannot be rich and famous. The net value of a number of congregations even in Third World countries would make each member a millionaire. The lifestyle of some priest and religious is that of the rich *burgis*.

Still, it is possible for us not only to make an option to be poor and obscure but to actually live the consequences of such an option. There are a number of factors required so that one could make such a passionate commitment. God's grace, the support of superiors and confreres, the political will of the person concerned, the location of one's ministry, the pastoral thrust of the Local Church to which one is connected, the urgent needs of the situation in which one is immersed, and the people's solidarity.

Without intending to sound self-righteous, while fully acknowledging my weaknesses and limitations, and fearing that I could turn arrogant and judgmental, I have the audacity to claim that I have tried my best to be poor and obscure.

It has not been easy. Many times one got very discouraged for not staying on track. Everyday, one faces trials and, consequently, could be easily tempted to give up. There have been instances of not passing the test. One constantly realizes that the challenge is to maintain the intensity of one's mission and the determination to push on despite the obstacle along the way.

What has helped me in this quest to be true to my deep aspiration for a radical discipleship is the nature of both our mission community (being an itinerant one) and the location of our missionary involvement (mainly in the frontiers and interiors of Mindanao).

Right after undergoing the required formation, I was assigned to be with a mission team among poor peasant communities and supporting programs for

Lumad communities. From 1987 until the time of writing this essay, our team members have been penetrating the villages in the interior; these tend to be located in the uplands – quite far from towns and cities – and are thus quite inaccessible because of limited infrastructure. These days we find ourselves dependent on the local motorcycle-based transport like the *skylab* and *habal habal*. When the rains pour and roads and rivers become one, and trails become quite “the beautiful feet” have no choice but walk.

An itinerant way of life is necessarily lived in poverty. When one relies on the generosity of mostly poor people, seeking (at times, begging) their hospitality in their humble abodes, one embraces the simplest of lifestyles. And if one mainly has to walk from village to village, house to house, across rolling hills and steep mountains- one has to travel light.

For there is wisdom in Jesus’ words: “Do not carry any gold, silver or copper in your purses. Do not carry a traveler’s bag, or an extra shirt, or sandals, or walking stick, for a worker deserves his living” (Mathew 10:09-10).

If one prefers to be away from the madding crowd, and remain anonymous, mission work is the ideal job. One can remain hidden in obscurity in the most isolated rural villages. “No one” knows you there at the start; later “no one” knows you are except you and the local folks. Your degrees, titles, past accomplishments, connections to powerful circles, prestige and symbolic capital – while perhaps useful in the overall scheme of things – do not count insofar as the ordinary folks are concerned (except, of course, in extraordinary circumstances).

You are accepted for the person that you are – your way of approaching them, the depth of your integration in their lives, your sense of compassion to their pains, your perceived openness to embrace their poverty, your readiness to listen to them speak of their everyday struggles, your goodwill and smile. Everything else is but icing on the cake.

Located in its hidden landscape, you are nobody. You won’t be projected in media; no one out there is bombarded with images of your noble commitments. You have disappeared into this setting that allows you to blend into a nondescript space that exists only in the people’s and your own consciousness. If you are the type of person who craves attention and who is alive only under the glare of spot-lights, this sort of existence would bore you to death.

Pastoral workers engaged in all sort of mission work are of course not only ones who are poor and obscure. There are the idealistic. NGO workers assisting peasants in suitable projects and the like. There are the dedicated cultural workers helping to empower Lumad leaders. There are women health workers passing on the grassroots women skills in taking care of the sick. There are even government employees – especially public school teachers- who could be included in this crowd so long as their sense of duty for the poor remains intact and they continue to resist the pressure of corruption.

One would like to see their numbers grow. Indeed fewer and fewer young people are drawn to seek jobs and/or options demand a certain level of poverty and obscurity. What seemed to be an attractive field (it certainly was for many

generation)no longer draws the attention of graduates and young professionals today.

May hope through is that this trend will be reversed at another time. After all, most of my own contemporaries in collage dreamt of becoming rich and famous and were seeking ways to stay on course toward this goal. Then Marcos came along and his marital law regime pushed us to change our priorities. Many took part in a movement that inspired a generation to go the countryside even if it meant becoming poor and obscure. Perhaps the generation following the present will see history repeating itself.

Factoring myself into the text, I find it ironic that even as I feel very strongly about being poor and obscure, the fact is that I am not really *that* poor nor that obscure. Herein lie the contradictions that I need to confront which also give rise to feelings of ambiguity and ambience.

I am poor to the extent that I – like the members of my community- live a life devoid comforts and conveniences of an upper middle class lifestyle which is typical of religious communities. Often we sleep in the homes of poor peasants which rarely electricity, flowing water, and decent comfort room. The food we eat is the usual” poor person’s meal which consists of corn/rice, *bulad/ginamos* (dried or salted fish), and the occasional leafy vegetable, except when the times are bountiful as in fiestas.

I am obscure only to the extent that the people hardly have an inkling who or what I am apart from the little that care to know. I am obscure in that I have disappeared into the landscape of the interior and is treated accordingly by the folks there.

But this state of poverty and obscurity is not limitless, however I don’t harbor the illusion that have security as a religious, or that I am a complete unknown beyond the villages of our mission areas, especially in church and NGO circles. In the words of Andy Warhol, I have had my 15 minutes of fame.

For as long as I can, I will do my best to stay within the frame work of the choice I had made and seek satisfaction in the small successes of living out that option. For indeed, a life devoid of material complexities can have its own joys.

In fact, a life reduced to the most basic can be quite liberating. One is not burdened with too much accumulated baggage – literally and otherwise

I have also found my self enjoying my anonymity. There are blessings when one “disappears” into a community and is shielded from the pressure of high expectations. One is not forced to wear a mask; one can be and can act his genuine self.

Still, as I count my blessings, there are moments when I ask my self why I made this option. Climbing up a steep mountain under heavy rains or heat of the noontime sun has provided the occasion to ask: What am I doing here? Crossing a flooded river or getting lost in the forest also have led me to tell my self: I don’t have to be here; I could stay safe and secure in a convent or an institute.

Yes, until now, I carry on. I don’t know for how long. One day my health and my body’s limitations will top me from living out these options as intensely as I do today. Already I am feeling the consequences of these limitations.

I also do not discount the possibility that I would give up and succumb to the temptations to take it easy. It has happened to friends former co-workers and people whom I have held as models for dedicated service to the people. If it happened to them, it could very well happen to me.

My hunch, however, is that I no longer crave to be rich and famous at this late stage of my life despite enticing signs and symbols glamorizing and romanticizing such a lifestyle. Wealth and fame do not really engage me in the same manner as beautiful landscapes, film, books, and relationships.

*Hinaut pa unta. Kabay pa. Sana.*

Meanwhile, I pray that in the future there will still be fools who would seriously consider a life lived precisely because they opt for what is less.

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