

Gratitude Is A Memory

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Gratitude Is a Memory of The Heart

In writing this reflection I recalled the words of Cardinal Sin in one of his Masses when we were in the Philippines, "Gratitude is a memory of the heart." How appropriate to hear those words at a Celebration of Eucharist, or Thanksgiving, and to take those words literally as we go forth from the celebration to become Eucharist, to love and serve the Lord in one another.

When I first visited the Philippines in 1992, I picked up a travel brochure of the Philippine Convention and Visitors' Bureau which said: "You've got to see it to believe it! ... 7,107 sun-blessed islands, with miles of pristine beaches; 62 million smiling faces; 365 days of happy music, colorful fiestas and celebrations; 24 hours of hospitable service from one of the friendliest people of the world; a million and one happy memories to bring back home; All these and more, only in the Philippines. AND IT'S ALL TRUE!"

However, what the brochure doesn't say is that the 7,107 sun-blessed islands are unprotected from the forces of nature and have more than their share of typhoons, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, etc. These frequent occurrences leave devastation in the lives of segments of the 62 million smiling faces, whose tiny nipa huts and small possessions are swept away in minutes; their livelihood from fishing or farming eliminated, and there's no place to go except into the streets of the large cities. The survivors, who are suddenly without homes, possession or family, have no age limit. We saw them all: male and female, infants, children, middle-aged and elderly. It's true that "Blessed are the poor," because when we have nothing left but our faith in God's concern and never-ending love, we are closest to His reign.

I had no difficulty in seeing Christ in each of the 62 million hopeful, smiling faces because, in spite of their hardships, their lack of material goods and comforts, of "blessings" in the eyes of the world, they have a beautiful spirit of song, of celebrating life, of hospitality, that is unsurpassed anywhere in the world. They share their meager means with all, in their struggles to fully live the life circumstances have dealt them.

As part of our inculturation we went to see what happens to the lives of people when they are forced to leave their homes to find employment for survival. We visited a site where 20,000 people lived on 60 years of accumulated garbage, which will always be impressed in my memory. To us who live in a first-world country where we enjoy advantages that 90% of the world are not privileged to, being forced to make your "home" on a garbage heap is foreign to what we know or can even imagine.

What we witnessed was a constant invasion of flies bringing disease, as tons of garbage were trucked in each day. People struggled to survive by salvaging what they could, e.g. broken light bulbs, discarded cans and bottles, plastic six pack holders, etc., for resale. Eyes watered as constant fires burned from internal combustion of the waste. People were recycled like the garbage; they had respiratory problems, meningitis, etc. Many died, especially the weakest — the children, while others were forced by conditions beyond their control to take their place.

God's family survived the best that they could because there was no where else to go. The government tried to relocate them, but with no other means of support than their salvage efforts, the poor were reluctant to leave. They had no health care and no police protection. The future was bleak. Since that time the government was successful in eradicating Smokey Mountain and relocating the people that were forced to live in these inhumane conditions.

However, the harshness of nature and destruction of livelihood will always be the plight of the poor. But God's promise to His children is HOPE, and He is a faithful God. He has friends, like you and me, through whom He makes possible His future. Witnessing the struggles of the people to eke out a life with some dignity, that all creatures of God deserve, is to hear the cry of the poor. To be welcomed into their midst in so many beautiful ways, and to see their grateful tears, and to hear, "You are an answer to our prayers," I believe, is God making His presence known to all of us through World of Hope's mission to make a difference, to give his children "HOPE."

As the brochure promised, I have a million and one happy memories, but as many sad, empathetic ones stored in memory. My immediate response moves me to gratitude, by sharing my gifts of time, talents and financial resources with those 62 million smiling faces that are indelibly recorded in my heart's memory.

Perhaps as you read this witness you may also be motivated to become an answer to someone's prayer.