


3-2002

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Recommended Citation

DelaGoza, Rolando S. C.M. (2002) "A Parish on Top of a Garbage Hill (Parish of Ina ng Lupang Pangako, Quezon City, Philippines)," *Vincentiana*: Vol. 46: No. 2, Article 6.
Available at: <http://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentiana/vol46/iss2/6>

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A Parish on Top of a Garbage Hill
(Parish of Ina ng Lupang Pangako, Quezon City, Philippines)

by Rolando S. DelaGoza, C.M.
Procurator General to the Holy See

Nestled on top of a hill, surrounded by the mansions of the rich, imposing shopping malls, and the National Legislative Building (Batasang Pambansa), the parish of our Lady of the Land of Promise (Ina ng Lupang Pangako) is indeed an ambivalent symbol of Christian hope. Thousands of its parishioners come from many islands (the Philippines has over 7,000 islands) hoping for a better life: work, education, social life, economic upliftment, etc. Strange to say, these people have to suffer a worse state in life than they would ever have imagined and which is unimaginable to people who come from the first world. For, before they could even find a job, they have to suffer the indignity of living on top of a garbage pile that could easily dwarf the small hills of Rome. It fell on the Vincentian Fathers and the Daughters of Charity to offer hope to this underprivileged and marginalized people of a huge super-metropolis, which is the city of Manila (population 12 million).

The Place

It was in 1991 that the Vincentians formed a community in Payatas, after Cardinal Sin offered the parish to the Sons of St. Vincent de Paul. Before that there were Jesuits and some other groups who worked there but it fell on the missionaries to set up a full parish with the programs needed to make such a poor place a Christian center of hope.

One has to see it in order to believe how people could live, could work, could breathe or even just eke out a living from a pile of garbage. The garbage is part of the refuse from the houses, the hotels, the schools, the factories, the slaughterhouses, the marketplaces right at the center of Metro Manila of which Quezon City is only a part. The pile of garbage is as much a part of the people's hope, maybe more so, than projects of the government and the Church combined. For from the beginning, when both the Church and the state were not giving hope to these exiled people, they already found solace and support from the garbage.

How can a pile of garbage be a symbol of hope?

When one sees dozens of huge trucks ramble along the city roads, one is consoled by the thought that some of the bad odor, the putrid meat, or the eyesores are gone from the neighborhood. But when the same trucks arrive in

Payatas, the people are consoled by the hope of earning a living and getting money for the education of their children. When people see a garbage dump they generally run away from the place, but when the scavengers of Payatas see a garbage truck, they run, even at danger to their lives, in order to be the first to take something precious or at least a thing of value for their daily lives. When one sees a cardboard box on a pile of garbage, one thinks of some precious computer or refrigerator that it once contained but the scavengers think of the possibility of taking the same box to a Chinese store to be exchanged for a few cents. The same could be said of a plastic bag, a piece of metal, an iron or tin can, a cloth, a beautiful piece of paper, a book, etc. They all become symbols of hope for the poorest of the poor.

The environmental risks

One could imagine millions upon millions of microbes, germs and insects bearing hundreds of diseases in the hot tropical climate. But if one can imagine all the garbage, thousands of trucks dumped in a few hectares of land, then the environmental risks are far worse than imagined by the scientists of the world. The monsoon rains that drip by drip pour on the garbage not only wash the tiny huts and utensils used by the scavengers, they also contaminate the water sources around the area. The people and their children's children have to forcibly drink from this sole source of water. But that is only one of the risks. The putrid smell, the eternal smoke, the wind, the humidity all contribute to making the place a true hell on earth.

The Vincentians

Since taking over the Parish in Payatas, a dozen Vincentians have been assigned there, many of them got sick and one lay brother died. In addition to taking care of the spiritual needs of the parishioners through the administration of the sacraments: daily Masses, confessions, etc., they have become social workers, defenders of the poor, organizers and factotum for the people. Their work days have no fixed hours, for even in the dead of the night, they have to wake up to the call of the wounded or the sick, victims of the criminal environment of the area. Stories of persons getting killed or wounded after a drinking spree, persons drugged who have to be taken to the hospital, poor without transportation who need the priests to drive them to the hospital.

In the beginning, the Vincentians stayed in a poor house, no better than the house of the poor who live in the area and celebrated Mass in a small makeshift chapel. Little by little, with the cooperation of the people, they built a chapel which could hold several hundred persons for daily Mass and the very animated well-orchestrated Sunday Mass. During the years, when this writer visited the parish several times, he observed the progress in the parish not only in

the physical appearance of the chapel but also in the welcoming attitude of the people around the area. They have benefitted from the programs, the prayers, the expertise of the priests and the sisters who made the parish located on top of the pile of garbage their own.

As mentioned above, the health hazards are very great; there is no scientific measurement done of the place but one's imagination is fired up just looking at the piles of garbage. Through the years, most of the priests who were assigned there got sick, many of bad pulmonary and related diseases. One lay brother died at a very young age. Thanks to the Lord, many of the priests and sisters would somehow be immunized and after a few years are able to resist the very terrible inconveniences and risks of living on top of a garbage dump.

The Programs

It is a great tribute to human ingenuity and perseverance that the parish on top of the garbage is fast becoming a real symbol of hope. Andrea Soco of the Institute on Church and Social Issues wrote an article, "Power from the Poor," summarizing the programs being implemented in Payatas and replicated in other parts of the Philippines:

"Twelve months ago, the country was shocked when a mountain of garbage collapsed and buried hundreds of informal settlers living at its foot. The event happened in Payatas, an area better known as a symbol of the nation's poverty. Today, people are still getting killed by minor landslides. Men, women and children continue to endure the stench of garbage and scavenge for a living. The dump still looms over the area, reminding residents of the tragedy a year ago and of their poverty.

But Payatas has another face – one that is filled with hope, as its residents carry on a slum upgrading project, a project that will be financed mainly by the residents' savings. While this month marks the anniversary of the trash slide, it also signals the possibilities of a partnership between the poor and the private sector. Earlier this week, the Asian Development Bank granted the Payatas community \$2,32 million as assistance for the project. Even without the grant, however, residents will still push through with slum upgrading. They, after all, have savings.

Long before the tragedy, Payatas residents were already implementing a savings and loan program initiated by the Vincentian Missionaries Social Development Foundation, Inc. This program enabled those with very little income, such as scavengers, to save and borrow for various purposes. Wilma, a member, maintained that she was able to send her children to school and buy a sewing machine through her savings.

Many other savings programs have been operating in Payatas since the 1990s. One of these is the savings for land and housing, which is specifically for land acquisition and housing purposes. Through such programs, residents have been able to address the seemingly unsurmountable urban poor problems of landlessness and the lack of tenure security.

Poor communities across the country have replicated the Payatas savings model in their areas. Many of these communities, the Kabalika Homeowners' Association in Iloilo, for instance, which is composed of very poor informal settlers, have already ventured into land acquisition. These cases show that the poor have resources that they can mobilize given the right push. As Maitet Diokno, president of the Freedom from Debt Coalition, mentioned in a forum on the Post-Estrada Reform Agenda, "There is big money in little people."

The government, however, and indeed many of us, see the poor as problems and not as partners in development. Hence, despite all the poverty-alleviation strategies thrown about, the majority of the population are still mired in poverty. If the goal is to reduce poverty, we must recognize the poor's capacity to mobilize resources and see the poor as human resources. Unless this happens, policies to fight poverty will merely be theoretical because these will not be about the poor but about figures – poverty incidence, unemployment rate, etc. – and about making a good impression on the public.

The same goes for poverty alleviation and reduction programs. Recently, the government and various sectors of society have been holding dialogues and workshops on poverty reduction but no new approach has been suggested. If the government keeps on doing what it has been doing or what past administrations have done, then it is likely that very little will be achieved" (Philippine Daily Inquirer, 16 July 2001, p. 9).

Vincentian Missionaries Social Development Foundation Incorporated (VMSDFI), Manila

The "Philippines Homeless People's Federation" with 20,000 member families is one of the distinctive and specific projects of the Vincentian Missionaries Social Development Foundation Inc. (VMSDFD). The main purpose of the federation is to help and guide families to save, negotiate secure land, form homeowner associations, identify sites on which they could build and search sources of loans and negotiate with the government with clearly costed proposals (Environment & Urbanization Vol. 13, no. 2, October 2001, p. 73). Way back in 1995, the Vincentians started the program in Payatas for the purpose of encouraging people to save and thus gain the capacity of building their own homes. The Payatas savings project, called "Lupang Pangako Savings

Association” has saved around 15 million pesos for micro-enterprises and is preparing for land acquisition.

Helped by the VMSDF, the Philippines Homeless People’s Federation has worked hard to acquire land and housing through various means:

- Saving for land and houses;
- Designing affordable houses and community layouts, using design workshops, model house exhibits and exchanges to sharpen people’s building skills and increase design options;
- Understanding the legal aspects of land acquisition, existing finance programs, land title and land conversion issues;
- Researching ownership records and negotiating to lease or buy land already occupied by settlements at affordable rates;
- Surveying unused government-owned land as potential housing sites, creating an inventory of potential relocation sites for poor people living in problem areas;
- Exploring other land and housing options in collaboration with the government, private landowners, finance institutions, international organizations and NGOs, to develop comprehensive, city-wide land and housing options which work for the poor and for the city (Environment & Urbanization, p. 80).

The various savings groups are linked into a national federation through which ideas, expertise, information and resources are created in one community. From its humble beginnings in the Parish on the Garabage Hill, the idea has spread to the three important regions of the Philippines: Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao. In fact, during its 1998 national assembly, 1,000 local members and 200 community leaders from Cebu, Mandaue, Calbayog, Samar, Iloilo, Davao, Surigao, General Santos, Bicol and Metro Manila gathered to discuss the future of this important project for the poor.

Conclusion

“Ina ng Lupang Pangako Parish,” or the “Our Lady of the Promised Land Parish” has gone a long way in helping the poorest of the poor who eke out their living by scavenging among the refuse of the mega-city of Manila. With 12 million people, Manila and its surrounding cities attract thousands upon thousands of immigrants from the far-flung islands of the Philippines, people who pin their hope of a better tomorrow on work and education for their children. In Manila, their dreams oftentimes become nightmares, their hopes turned into despair. The small light that guided this people came with the creation of a Vincentian parish with its numerous pro-poor projects which have become models for the whole Philippines. Through the intercession of the “Mother of the

Land of Hope” (Ina ng Lupang Pangako), the poor now have a chance to have a better life and a better future for their children.