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Education with a Heart

By

GREGORIO L. BAÑAGA, JR., C.M., PH.D.

President, Adamson University

Nakakahiyaang maging mahirap! Nakakahiya kasi iba ang tingin sa iyo ng tao. Mahirap ka daw at walang asenso sa buhay dahil sa tamad ka, wala kang ambisyon at ayaw mong magsikap mapabuti ang buhay mo Hindi ka raw ma-abilidad. Kapag kaharap mo ang isang taong maykaya, nanliliit ka kasi hindi ka katulad nila na kayang bilhin ang mga gusto nilang gamit. KAYA NAKAKAHIYANG MAGING MAHIRAP AT MAHIRAP MAGING MAHIRAP.

It's a shame to be poor. It really is, because people look at you differently. Before their eyes, you are poor and have little chance of improving your lot in life because you are lazy, without ambition and lack the determination to escape from poverty. You are not resourceful. When you find yourself side-by-side with the wealthy, you feel so insignificant for unlike them, you have no power and capacity to buy anything at will. THAT'S WHY I FEEL ASHAMED; IT'S REALLY HARD TO BE POOR.

Gerry Cortez, thirty-five years old, a contractual employee providing janitorial services in our university, expressed with a tinge of embarrassment and apprehension how shamefully difficult it is to be poor. To him and many, many others, it is indeed a shame.

The Poor in the Philippine Context

Why are the poor seen in this way? Even the use of the term "poor" is today discouraged. Social development workers try to correct the notion of poverty by referring to poor people not as "poor" but rather in more politically correct parlance, such as "socially disadvantaged" or "underprivileged," as if these terms somehow soften the negative impact. Many other names are given to the poor, such as the Hebrew *anawim* — as used in old scriptures when referring to suffering and powerless people — or "marginalized." If those on the margins constitute the majority of our people, then the

margin must be thicker than the center!

According to some information, those living below the poverty line have reached over 40 percent of our population. The poor have steadily increased over the years, those already poor still sinking deeper into the quagmire while new ones emerge everyday.

Many theories have been proposed to explain why the Philippines continues to deteriorate as a nation. One theory talks about “premature democracy” while another blames our Catholic orientation, which seems to prefer poverty over material wealth as the value to emulate. Others blame a corrupt political system, our colonial past, or overpopulation, or even bring it down to our character stereotyped as lazy, fatalistic and easygoing.¹ Still others attribute it to a global system of injustice that makes us unwitting victims.

For educators, and there are many of us here today, the questions that remain unanswered are: What has my school done to address the poverty situation? Where have we succeeded and where have we failed? What has gone wrong with Catholic education? If education is a way out of poverty, then why do our people remain poor? Do our students see poverty as a problem that requires a solution, or as an opportunity for personal gain? When they graduate, do they become part of the elite that perpetuates poverty, or do they work for the transformation of society?

Catholic Education and Poverty

Catholic education, particularly in the Philippines, has been criticized for being privileged and for creating a new kind of elite. According to the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines:

Many affluent Filipinos have a cultural fixation towards elitism in education. Such elitism not only waters down education to a status symbol, but tends to produce in well-to-do students not only a feeling that they are a people apart, but also a misguided priority that education is merely a tool to gain privileges and advance one’s social class. Because high standards of education require high financial support, Catholic schools may find it impossible to express the Christian love of preference for the poor.²

Douglas Foley stressed that the “Filipino elite developed their own

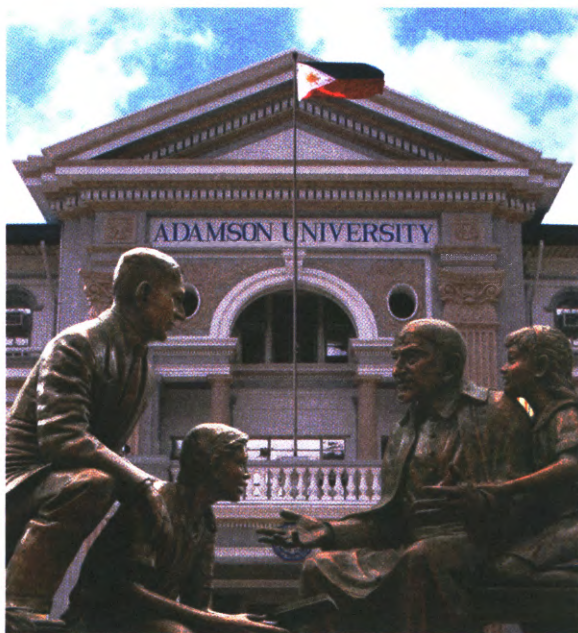
¹ Ramon R. Del Rosario, Jr., “Perspectives and Transitions in Private Education,” *Educational Leadership and Management Development Seminar Series*, 10 March 2003.

² *Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines: Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines [PCP II]* (Manila: St. Paul’s Publications, 1992), no. 633.

private school system to preserve their privilege and access to the colonial bureaucracy.”³ Reverend Jimmy A. Belita, C.M., my predecessor, wrote while citing Foley that:

...Philippine education has been suffering from a perennial problem, ever since colonizers, both Spanish and American, brought about an elitist form of education. In the time of the Spaniards, education was channeled through the Church who reserved her best schools for the rich... even her schools that were founded for the poor eventually became schools for the rich.⁴

Our educational institutions have their unique interpretation and response to the needs of our society. Rightly or wrongly, they do what they believe is right and they strive to excel at it. Our institution is no exception.



Adamson University, Philippines. The Jubilee statue.

Photo courtesy the editors

³ Douglas Foley, "Colonialism and Schooling in the Philippines, 1898-1970," in *Education and the Colonial Experience*, Philip G. Altbach and Gail P. Kelly, eds. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transactions Inc., 1984), 51.

⁴ Jimmy A. Belita, C.M., *Teaching and Being-A-Church: Towards an Ecclesiology of Education* (Manila: Adamson University Press, 1997), 7.

Adamson University's History

Adamson University was established in 1932 by an immigrant Greek who saw the need for technical skills to fuel a young nation's major leap towards industrialization.⁵ The Adamson School of Industrial Chemistry, as the university was originally named, provided the pioneering impetus for the opening of technical schools that would educate middle and lower-middle-class students who could not afford the sectarian schools that catered to more privileged members of Philippine society.

The school prepared future technicians to run the industries owned by graduates of other schools. It had students coming from unheard-of barrios in Luzon and the Visayas and even as far as Jolo in Sulu — sons and daughters of the working and peasant class who dreamed of better lives as professional engineers, chemists, pharmacists, teachers, and small-scale businessmen, not as soil tillers or tenants of the *hacienderos*.

Mr. George Lucas Adamson somehow knew that from the ranks of the poor would spring forth the working class, the backbone of the middle class that would move the country towards economic growth and development. With the help of two cousins, he steered the university toward becoming a center of technical and scientific expertise, and he provided an environment that upheld professionalism and excellence. He emphasized social responsibility, technical education, respect for the balance of natural resources, short courses to help clientele upgrade their social status, and maintenance for their key clients from the poor and working classes.

When the Vincentians took over Adamson University from the Adamson family in 1964, the move did not come as a surprise. After having been the tenants of the Vincentians in the San Marcelino property just after World War II, the Adamsons offered the university to the priests as new laws in the Philippines required all schools to be fully owned by Filipino nationals.

Many people have wondered how the Vincentians — also known as the Congregation of the Mission, known mostly for their popular missions and for their education of clergy — ever became involved in education. Having come to the Philippines in 1862, they established what were known as *colegio-seminarios* (college-seminaries) in the dioceses of Manila, Vigan, Naga, San Pablo in Laguna, Jaro in Iloilo, Cebu, Jagna in Bohol, Calbayog in Samar, and Tacloban in Leyte. Noted graduates included Cardinal Rufino Jiao Santos, Cardinal Jaime Lachica Sin, and Cardinal Julio Rosales. There were also some students of the *colegio-seminarios* who did not become clergy: noted national leaders such as President Sergio Osmeña; Sister Graciano Lopez Jaena,

⁵ Rolando S. Dela Goza, C.M., and Bernardita Reyes Churchill, *Adamson University: A History [1932-1992]* (Manila: Adamson University Press, 1993).

founder of *La Solidaridad*; Jose Maria Panganiban, the brilliant propagandist of Rizal's time; Ramon Avancena, former chief justice of the Supreme Court; and many other senators and provincial governors.⁶

Adamsons and Vincentians: Two Streams Joining to Form a River

As the Vincentians took over the reins of the university, they brought with them their heritage of compassionate service to the poor, their core values anchored in the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, their solid experience in education, their deeply spiritual and holistic approach to the development of the human person, and even their strong sense of nationalism. The two traditions of the Adamsons and the Vincentians are likened to two separate streams that joined together to form a mighty river, converging towards many commonalities such as the clients they serve, their awareness of every individual's social responsibility, and their continuous striving for excellence in functional and practical education.

The confluence of these streams of influence has brought Adamson its share of glory and fame in academic excellence, professionalism, service to the poor, and developmental impact in society. This glorious heritage is what we are called to build on and bring forward with renewed commitment and bold creativity.

At this point I invite you to reflect with me on how we can further sharpen the vision and mission of Adamson University by making higher education accessible to the poor.

Vincentian Education in the Philippines: From Servant University to Education with a Heart

It was the third university president, Reverend Rolando Dela Goza, C.M., who conceptualized Adamson's role as a "servant university." Father Dela Goza expounded on his concept of "servant university" in his investiture speech in November 1986, when he declared:

Adamson University, drawing inspiration from the Gospel, should conform to the image of the Human Person, Jesus Christ, the model Servant, in order to counteract some of [our society's] ills. We see from the evangelical perspective how Christ, our Lord and Savior, modeled the role of Servant, ministering to the needs of the people, especially the poor. His words and actions consistently showed that

⁶ Rolando S. Dela Goza, C.M., and Jesus M. Cavanna, C.M., *Vincentians in the Philippines: 1862-1982* (Makati, Metro Manila: Salesiana Publishers, 1985).

He came to serve all who are in dire need and that anyone who wishes to be His follower must do no less... No less than the Supreme Pontiff, Pope John Paul II, has underscored this mission of Catholic education. In his speech before the Presidents of Catholic universities at Washington, D.C., in 1988, he stressed: "The goals of Catholic higher education go beyond education for production, professional competence, technological and scientific competence; they aim at the ultimate destiny of the human person, at the full justice and holiness born of truth." And what is the truth? That service to the poor is an integral part of full justice and holiness... A university education, therefore, and this our students should be made to believe in and recognize, should not be taken solely as a ticket to affluence and power but as necessary preparation, during which Christian values must be inculcated, for their moral obligation to be of more and better service to others.⁷

The socioeconomic and political situation of the Philippines has worsened in the last two decades since Father Dela Goza put forward the concept of the "servant university" as a response to the social ills plaguing the country during his time. And undoubtedly poverty remains the central issue today it was then.



Scholars meet at Adamson to discuss the educational program
Institutional Quality Assurance through Monitoring and Evaluation.

Photo courtesy of the author

⁷ Rolando S. Dela Goza, C.M., *Investiture Speech*, 1986.

It has often been said that education is a way out of poverty, but we say that education brings us into the heart of poverty, for the dynamic of Vincentian education puts the poor right at the center of our mission. This is based on the philosophy that Vincentian education is:

- “of the poor,” meaning that it provides the poor accessibility to education;
- “from the poor,” meaning that the perspective of education is taken from where the poor stand;
- “with the poor,” meaning that we are in solidarity with those who have less; and
- “for the poor,” meaning that education is transformational and promotes advocacy, and we orient our students to have preferential treatment for the poor.

Like any institution of higher learning, Adamson offers a wide range of educational programs and services aimed at producing professionals who are competent and qualified in their own fields of discipline. Like other Catholic schools, we pursue truth and knowledge under the guiding light of sacred scriptures and the teachings of the Catholic faith. What makes Adamson University unique is the Vincentian character imprinted in its programs, services, and culture that are all inspired by the life and works of Saint Vincent de Paul, its patron saint.

Education of the Poor

Saint Vincent de Paul, who lived in the seventeenth century, is known worldwide for having dedicated his life to the poor and needy. While he did not establish any school other than seminaries during his lifetime, the example of his life and unique spiritual perspective can serve to guide our educational philosophy and process.

While Vincent welcomed all kinds of people and interacted with them, he had a special preference and concern for the poor. He saw Christ in every person he met but he treated the poor with special respect, thereby helping them to feel their human dignity and bringing home the message that although poverty was dehumanizing, it was nothing to be ashamed of.

While the doors of this university are open to everyone, the socially disadvantaged, the children of the working class, and those in the margins of society occupy a special place within our walls. We want to be known as a university where the poor can find opportunities to break the vicious cycle of poverty and indignity to which they are subjected. We do this by keeping our tuition fees affordable and providing a host of scholarships. To date,

the scholarships amount to more than P64 million (equivalent to \$1,377,825), with close to 10 percent of our total student population enjoying these grants. We aim to increase this number twofold in five years' time, and we will work on being an effective channel for resources in the education of the poor.

We want the poor to have access to quality education in the same way that Edgardo Sitjar, a former contractual janitor, now enjoys a scholarship grant and serves as a student assistant in our Religious Education department. The department's faculty members, inspired by his determination, support him by each chipping in P50 every *quincena* (fifteenth day of the month) toward his monthly board and lodging of P1,500.

Education from the Perspective of the Poor

Vincent de Paul was the son of peasants and was deeply immersed in the world of the poor. His approach to life and service was to start where the people were. "In a strange sort of way," Reverend Jimmy Belita, C.M., writes, "the poor do service to a school by being critical of its institutionalism and business policies."⁸ Quoting the Latin American theologian Jon Sobrino, Father Belita continues: "[T]he university should see the world from the point of view of the poor if it wants to be a truly liberating and empowering form of education." It is quite clear that this proposition runs counter to an education detached from real-life situations and influenced by powerful people who tilt our society's balance of power in their own favor.

Our students, especially the poor, are the starting point of our educational mission. The delivery of educational programs and services starts from them and revolves around them. We consider their gifts, needs, and circumstances, and devise ways in which we can facilitate their growth and development in the discovery, sharing, and use of knowledge and skills. To do this we have to immerse ourselves in the lives of the poor and make that experience the point of departure for our educational process. Today the technical term to describe this process is "dialogue of life." In the words of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines:

There should be a periodic and systematic exposure of administrators, faculty, staff and students to the context of the poor and the needy. Such a process of contextualization will help engender the development of a love of preference for the poor and of a missionary spirit in every sector of the school community. Those in the teaching profession in particular can make use of this context to lead their students towards a

⁸ Belita, *Teaching and Being*, 90.

critical assimilation of culture, and a comprehensive synthesis of faith and life. Student involvement in outreach programs for the poor will provide the occasion for fostering talent sharing, while processing and concretizing value formation. Imbued with the missionary spirit, they stand to learn and receive much by reaching out to the poor and the needy.⁹

In terms of research, we have to have a strong bias towards poverty issues: causes, supportive societal structures, underlying attitudes, and short-term and long-term solutions to this menace of society. Research must be relevant and pragmatic and must impact the world of the poor — and not only for publication purposes. Moreover, while we believe knowledge can be discovered in isolation, the Vincentian approach leans toward the discovery of knowledge by dialogue with grassroots and marginalized people. In this way, the school develops a “conscience” and becomes a credible institution.¹⁰

Education with the Poor

If you go to the Chapel of the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity in Paris you will see the uncorrupted heart of Saint Vincent in a reliquary, preserved by God because it had so much love. Before Saint Vincent plunged himself into serving the poor, he first learned to love them and be in solidarity with them. “First the heart,” he told his followers, “then the work.” For Vincentian educators, this is an invitation to love our students enough to “walk” with them. This demands that we sincerely listen to them and have compassion for them. It also means that we become receptive and humble, opening ourselves to learn from them, for they have much to offer to us.

Vincent de Paul’s genius lay in his ability to share his vision and inspire a wide spectrum of people to get involved in his work. Vincentian educators are called to share their vision with others and to involve different stakeholders — administrators, faculty, staff, alumni, industry partners, and students — in creating a learning community where unique talents and abilities are recognized, appreciated, and used. In so doing, we create a very powerful and rich environment for learning. In the words of Reverend Robert Maloney, C.M., the former superior general of the Congregation of the Mission, speaking at the installation of the president of St. John’s University, a Vincentian university in New York City:

⁹ *Second Plenary Council*, no. 642.

¹⁰ Belita, *Teaching and Being*, 90.

Let the Vincentian mission... be a collaborative effort. Let it mobilize the efforts not just of the members of the Congregation of the Mission, but of all the lay administrators, faculty members and staff who labor in this great university. Let them feel a part of this mission... If there was anything Vincent de Paul knew how to do, it was to draw everyone into his captivating vision of life. At his one side was the queen of France, Anne; at his other side was a peasant girl who did not know how to read or write, Marguerite Naseau. He energized rich and poor, men and women of every rank in society, because he shared his vision with them."¹¹

Education for the Poor

Vincent de Paul had a heart for the poor, but did not romanticize them. He assisted them in their needs, but saw to it that those who were able went to serve the poor themselves. Our educational process intends to help our students become not only competent professionals and compassionate Christians but people committed to personal, institutional, and social transformation for the poor.

In the commencement speech delivered by our alumnus, Jose Roland Moya, during graduation ceremonies last October, he shared a story about his fellow alumni, Dennis Afinidad and Maricel Mendoza, whom he met during a NAMFREL (National Movement for Free Elections) visit in the hills of Tanay during the 1998 elections. Dennis and Maricel, a married couple, were both active in church work and NAMFREL and had foiled a cheating attempt during that election without regard for the danger involved. Their volunteerism and bravery continue to inspire many young people to get involved in social transformation.¹²

The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines muses that:

We must sadly admit, however, that many of the graduates of our schools... do not seem to have sufficiently assimilated Christian values in such a way as to renew their Christian living... Many seem to look at Catholic education simply as a passport to better opportunities for earning a living, rather than as a grace to live better human and Christian lives, entailing a serious responsibility to build a better world. Many

¹¹ Robert P. Maloney, C.M., *Address at the Presidential Inauguration*, St. John's University, N.Y., 5 October 1989.

¹² Jose Roland Moya, *Commencement Address, Graduation Ceremonies of Adamson University*, 26 October 2004.

graduates of Catholic schools have been successful economically and politically but they have also contributed to the dismal economic and political imbalances existing in our country.¹³

As Vincentian educators, we are advocates of education for social transformation. Our intent is to educate students who will be agents of change and catalysts in the transformation of society — not to create a class apart nor to perpetuate the vicious cycles that marginalize the poor. This implies that we should further enhance our processes and services, especially community service, to create a mentality and culture of social responsibility in academe. Our approach is to make volunteerism and service to others an integral component of academic disciplines. To the many unsung heroes out there, and to those who share our vision of social transformation and can complement our efforts for empowering those in the margins of society, we open up the human and material resources of the university. Our alumni, heeding this call, have become our partners in this endeavor.

Lourdes Supetran, an alumna from our Chemistry department, together with her husband, built ACS Manufacturing Corporation, which produces several popular household brands like Star Wax, Pride Powder Detergent, Smart Dishwashing Detergent, and Unique Toothpaste. ACS Manufacturing is listed among the top 1,000 corporations in the country. Mrs. Supetran explains that she did not participate in the commencement exercises after her studies because she did not have the means. Today, she serves her alma mater by employing many Adamson University graduates in her company and by providing scholarship grants to deserving chemistry students. She also served as president of the Alumni Association for two years.

Education with a Heart

“Those who have less in life must have more of your heart,” asserted Reverend Daniel Franklin Pilario, C.M., the dean of our School of Theology, during his Baccalaureate Mass homily last October.¹⁴ But before we even engage in the task and mission of education, we have to look into our motives, as these determine and influence how we give of ourselves and the kind of work we do for others. For Christian and Vincentian educators this is an invitation to put ourselves wholeheartedly behind the vocation. There is no room for halfheartedness — only for single-minded devotion. One hopes that our example will inspire the youth under our care to also give

¹³ *Second Plenary Council*, no. 627.

¹⁴ Daniel Franklin Pilario, C.M., *Baccalaureate Mass Homily*, 26 October 2004.

themselves to whatever they will be involved with in the future, even if it leads them to giving up their lives.

“It is not enough to do good; we have to do it well,” Saint Vincent always advised his followers. We have to renew our commitment to excellence and dedication. The poverty of our students is no excuse for not striving for excellence in our services and programs and not putting our whole self into our vocation and mission. We must not rest on our laurels in technical and professional education; we must keep on transforming ourselves, doing more, and blazing new trails.

Journeying towards the Future

The story of Adamson does not end here. Like a mighty river it continues to swell and flow, cutting through rocks and dead branches along its path, forging new streamlets that will later become new rivers. I wish to thank all those who made Adamson University what it is today — from those who envisioned it to those who developed it and brought it to greatness. The past has not been without challenges. Still, the future is replete with them and difficulties can be daunting.

Adamson is nearly seventy-five years old. We will be celebrating our diamond jubilee in 2007. This can be a curse, considering all the baggage that we have accumulated from our past — the innate resistance to change, the reluctance to move outside our comfort zones, and inertia born out of complacency and cynicism. Or we face an opportunity — to dig deeper, to leverage on what we have built and the reputation we have made for ourselves.

It is not coincidental that this ceremony is held inside this historic church — the first in the Philippines to be built using reinforced concrete — and preceded by the celebration of the Eucharist. It is meant to remind us that the God who inspired Saint Vincent de Paul more than three hundred years ago with a mission of serving the poor will also be behind us as we continue our mission of touching lives and forming character in the youth entrusted to our care. “What God has done for us in the past is so great,” Saint Vincent wrote, “that we can look to the future with hope and confidence.”

Gerry Cortez, nais kong malaman mo na mayroon kang karapatang magkaroon ng edukasyon at dignidad bilang tao at hindi kailangan ikahiya ang pagiging mahirap.

Gerry Cortez, let me assure you that it's your right to have an education and to have dignity as a person; and that you must not feel ashamed of being poor.

May God, who inspired us in the beginning, continue to guide us and bring success to the work of our hands.