

SISTER CARIDAD BARRION, OSB



by Sister M. Bernardita G. Bernas, OSB

I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message, be persistent, in season and out of season; convince, rebuke and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. (2 Tim.4:2)

As a college student I was in awe of our dear Sister Caridad. I guess I still am. That is one reason why I accepted this assignment ‘in fear and trembling’. Anything I write about Sister Caridad would be an understatement, I thought.

And so it is with patient resignation that I sit here trying to figure out how to start. At the moment my heart is still full of the beautiful Centennial Cultural show at St. Cecilia’s Hall last night. I can still picture with pride how our Agnesian graders gave their best in their presentation of Daragang Magayon, the legend of Mayon Volcano. As a Bicolana who for the first time is assigned in St. Agnes I am endlessly in awe of the serene, majestic beauty - the drama that is Mt. Mayon. Come to think of it, Mayon and our dear Sister Caridad. Indeed in many ways, Mt. Mayon reminds me of the beautiful DRAMA that was our dear Sister Caridad.

The Drama of Her Birth and Religious Calling

The circumstances of her birth already hinted at this drama: It is said that when Taal Volcano furiously erupted in 1911, the molten rocks and embers rolled as far as Manila. Leonor Barrion was born on June 27 of that year. She was like Taal Volcano, wrote Mother Angelica in her introduction during her funeral mass. She had that volcanic, persuasive power of acting and speaking which made you eventually love what you hated to do in the first place.

The drama continued when, after college graduation in 1930, she asked her parents’ permission to join the Missionary Benedictine Sisters. They were very much against it and even decided to have her strictly guarded. The plot of this real life nobela thickens as described in the following excerpt from her obituary:

Finally, in 1935, her confessor, Fr. Moran sent Pacita del Rosario to “kidnap” Leonor. Pacita went to Taal in search of embroidered articles which was the business of the Barrion family. Pretending not to find what she wanted, she asked Leonor to accompany her to Lemery. The mother allowed Leonor and so with the permission of the mother to leave the house, they went to Manila. For the night Leonor slept in San Juan de Dios Hospital. The next morning she was brought to St. Scholastica’s College lying low on the floor of the car like meat delivered to the convent kitchen. Meanwhile, the brothers, with revolvers, were in the parlor. Mother Prioress Clodesindis, OSB, could say, “She is not here.” Thank God she did not know that Leonor entered through the convent kitchen and was already having a reunion with Sisters Margarita and Lieou somewhere in the convent.

The Drama in Teaching Us ‘His Story’

Sister Caridad was remembered for many things but foremost among these were her strong sense of history and an even stronger sense of DRAMA in presenting HISTORY as ‘HIS STORY’. She taught us the subject in a way only she could teach. As a history major, writes her niece, Cecilia Dimaano Alip, I sat mesmerized in her classroom, nay, overwhelmed, as she discoursed in a most dramatic way the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome; as she reminded us tirelessly that “amidst the changing things of this world, may our hearts be set where true joys are to be found”. And if as school administrators today we can still keep our cool in the face of a hundred problems and concerns it was because Sister Caridad had repeatedly reminded us that “God writes straight with crooked lines!” As a teacher par excellence she showed us how the words and works of the Lord are reflected in the ‘mighty maze’ of deeds and events which we call history – His Story.

The Drama in Shaping the ‘True and Finished Women of Character’

As College Dean and teacher Sister Caridad’s one obsession was to ‘shape and form the hearts and minds of generations of Filipinas according to the image of the ‘true and finished woman of character’. As First Year students we were made to memorize this ideal she wanted us to strive for:

One who thinks, judges, acts constantly and consistently in accordance with right reason illumined by the light, example and teachings of Christ. In other words, to use the current term:

THE TRUE AND FINISHED WOMAN OF CHARACTER.

This she drilled into every college student in many varied but always dramatic ways. Mrs. Lala Castillo shares details that in our days spelled ‘the true and finished woman of character’:

... bra straps in place UNDER chemise straps; First Friday attire complete down to the missal in your right hand (in our days we wore caps and gowns to First Friday masses); and absolute silence along the corridors.

We had a college Dean who saw to it that every FRESHMAN’S TERM PAPER WAS IMPECCABLY TYPED AND SUBMITTED ON TIME, who shrunk the heads of budding campus figures with just one statement, “REMEMBER, EXTRA-CURRICULAR IS EXTRA!” and who punctuated every blessed requirement for a liberal arts degree with the statement, “Woe to you if

you don't comply!" We quaked through Monday mornings when a fast quiz told her whether we went to Sunday Mass, said the daily rosaries, and went to Confession and Communion.

Sister Caridad was an exacting teacher. I remember how in the wee hours of mornings I would sit tearfully re-typing term papers until I was absolutely sure they could stand her careful scrutiny. Margins had to be strictly followed; footnotes had to be in place and strictly no untidy erasures. For Sister Caridad, a 'true and finished woman of character' did not turn in sloppy work, did not vacillate on important decisions, did not compromise one's principles and was never half-hearted in any undertaking.

There were many times we felt she was unreasonable in her demands and we rebelled, an alumna admits, but her commitment to the education of "true and finished women of character" was so total, one could only be impressed. She was quite successful in doing this to her students, adds Mother Angelica, because they could see through her – they could understand that she was insistent about things, not for her own self-interest or self-satisfaction, but for their own good.

The Silent Drama of Her Love for us.

As far as I can remember Sister Caridad always held multiple positions. During her almost three decades of service at St. Scholastica's College, Sister Caridad was Dean of the College of Liberal Arts, Dean of Students and Prefect of Boarders. She also served as Head of the History Department, in-charge of Social Service and Catechetical work, as well as Alumnae Moderator. Despite her heavy load she was never too busy for her students. She used to accompany us as catechists, jumping in and out of jeepneys, and walking narrow dusty roads to reach Rafael Palma, Jose Rizal, Culi-culi and Welfareville. I gratefully recall how she kept me company the first week of my catechetical work in the School for the Deaf and Blind. This she did because she saw that I was so scared of the sounds the students produced in their efforts to catch my attention. I fondly remember how she "wasted" almost an hour of one of her busy mornings consoling me and my sisters when news of my grandfather's death reached us. Surely, each college student during her time has her own 'love story' to tell.

Sister Caridad knew each one of us personally. Many alumnae still keep stampitas she faithfully gave each college student on her birthday. These were much appreciated 'birthday gifts' complete with carefully handwritten 'love notes' which each recipient knew was meant only for her and for no other.

She interviewed each of her students every semester, counseled them about their love life and vocational preferences, waited for them to lay their bridal bouquets at our Lady's altar, prepared St. Benedict's medals for them and their bridegrooms; followed them up as newly-weds, and eventually as parents and grandparents. (From M. Angelica's Funeral Mass Introduction)

And this was perhaps the one most important memory all of us keep of Sister Caridad - THE WAY SHE LOVED US AS THOUGH EACH ONE OF US WAS THE ONLY STUDENT IN CAMPUS.

Sister Caridad suffered much during her last years but this did not stop her from demonstrating her love for us, our Priory and our Congregation:

Her old ailment, diabetes, took more control of her during the early 80's. But this did not deter her from writing a book: THE MISSIONARY BENEDICTINE SISTERS IN THE PHILIPPINES.

By 1983, she could no longer use the typewriter extensively and holding a pen was a great strain on her . . . yet with the aid of secretaries and through dictation, she continued to work on another monumental book: the translation of the HISTORY OF OUR CONGREGATION entitled: THE FIVE-BRANCH CANDLESTICK from German into English, assisted by sisters from Baguio, Tutzing, Germany and Norfolk, USA. This was completed in 1984 just on time for our Congregation's Centennial celebration. By 1985 she was bedridden, but she continued to give history lessons to the postulants, novices and junior sisters. Till finally in 1986, God silenced her; though she could hear clearly, she could no longer speak. Parkinson's disease had taken hold of her arms , and legs and tongue. (From her Obituary)

Sister Caridad was called home by the Father on September 29, 1987 at the age of 76. She would have celebrated her Golden Jubilee of Profession October 7 of that year.

Conclusion

In his second letter to Timothy St. Paul urges us in a very dramatic way to give our all, tirelessly, in spreading the Gospel. Proclaim the message, he writes, be persistent, in season and out of season; convince, rebuke and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching (2 Tim. 4:2). It is a passage that aptly describes the moving force behind Sister Caridad's exceptional dedication to her 'ora et labora', a precious legacy to us all. She was a teacher par excellence – patiently convincing, rebuking, encouraging and, above all, loving each one under her care, 'in season and out of season'. True to her name, Sister Caridad, could do so much only because she loved much.

That in All Things God May Be Glorified!