

SISTER LIGUORI DEL ROSARIO, OSB



PASSING ON A MISSIONARY NUN-SENSE

(WITHOUT EMOTION!)

by Sister Miriam Noemi Francisco, OSB

“SOY CONTENTA,” (I am content) was her memorable final statement about her life shortly before she left her earthly body and proceeded to the haven God had already prepared for her. As one lives so one dies, it has been said. The world Sister Liguori left is the kind that breeds discontent. But her horizons always extended beyond this world. She always saw it in the light of eternity, in conspectu Dei (in God’s viewpoint), a recurrent phrase in her theology classes. More precisely (she insisted on precision) she was contented with the divine scheme of things.

“Helpless, bedridden, wracked with pain, she was content,” marveled a Sister. One thought of Alpine “milk from contented cows.” The most healthful, nourishing milk for humans after mother’s milk is milk from contented cows. The passing on of a Benedictine and missionary nun-sense to the next generation is milking the memory of a contented Missionary Benedictine.

No Nonsense Discipline

“Pass your papers without emotion,” that’s what instantly comes to mind every time any of her students think of Sister Liguori. It was both no nonsense discipline like that of St. Benedict and a wry sense of humor like that of St. Scholastica.

Her students in Dogmatic Theology were prepared to be surprised any day with her surprise quizzes. Her essay questions were a hard nut to crack. They were the kind that made a class collectively groan when the teacher called out, “Time is up.” “Oh no, I’m not done!” Five minutes more, please!” Sister Liguori would allow no such thing. She would not even call our time was up. Just “Pass your papers without emotion.” Year after year her classes meekly did.

“Our class always seemed to know what Sister Liguori expected of us,” Sister Pia Lansang, OSB, recalls. “For example, SILENCE before she would appear in class. It was established practice that one of the students would go and fetch Sister Liguori from her office only when the class was

settled and ready. What a disciplined, systematic, objective, logical and no nonsense person she was. She communicated well the Christian faith, opening to us the wealth of Scripture, e.g..., the Letters of St. Paul.”

While giving a painstaking explanation of God’s intervention in human affairs to a sophomore class, she drew a downward curve that started from the top frame of the blackboard. As she went on speaking the chalk in her hand continued its forward movement in a graceful curve that returned to the top frame indicating mathematical infinity. The line described what in geometry is called a parabola. Sister Liguori was also a mathematics whiz.

“That,” she said, “is the divine parabola of God’s intervention in humankind’s affairs.”

“Ah, parang bola,” came a whispered quip from one of the brightest students sitting in the back row.

“How shallow can you get,” was the quick retort sheathed in Liguorian ice. The class cringed. The smart aleck in the back row wasn’t exactly a shallow student. But Dogmatic Theology wasn’t exactly a seventeen-year-old girl’s cup of tea.

Molding the True and Finished Woman of Character:

Discipline of the Mind and of the Heart

This was standard Liguorian practice at recitation period: she should shuffle class cards though she knew everyone in the class by name. “Miss Arcos,” she’d call out, a no-no in educational psychology; a teacher is supposed to field a question first, look around then call someone. “Miss Arcos, prove in logical sequence that...(etc.) This was another classic phrase. Intimidated and unprepared the student stammered out a sequence of statements. “Sit down, Miss Arcos; you don’t know what you’re talking about.” It didn’t matter that this was a student with a straight-A report card or maybe a student she liked a lot. Just at that moment her powers of reasoning was at an F. With bright students Sister Liguori was more exacting. All students she pushed beyond their own prefabricated limits. But show just a bit of know-it-all arrogance and she would demolish it.

Somehow the teen-aged students generally could see through the stern exterior, the withering stare of the ego-flattening one-liner, a golden caring heart. After an abbreviated chat with her down a corridor a glam campus journalist confided, “It dawned on me this terror-professor of a nun is one of the womanliest women I ever got to know.” An impressive sight, too, was a Sister Liguori grinning ear to ear as little graders clung to her hands, played with her scapular and stole a peek under her long black veil.

Enlightened with hindsight, alumnae remember with gratitude Sister Liguori’s hands-on presence to the academic community she led. They acknowledge her presence to them even in their inner events. “As Chemistry teacher she made us memorize the Table of the Elements. If you scored lower than 5 you get called to her office to explain. If you were just lazy or had the wrong priorities you get a scolding like fire and brimstone.” Called to the office once, student Fe Collantes explained she was wrestling with problem. “I did not get a scolding. Instead I got the ear of her heart. I particularly miss that here now, that kind of listening to your most personal concerns. She told it like it was, no holds barred, when she pointed out to you the error of your ways, but she was with you. She had the audacity of a prophet, near harshness even, in telling it like it is, doing what

needs to be done, and the same saving grace. Just recalling all these now revives something in me.”
Wow!

Nevertheless, under her eagle eye all the collegiate students were scared of her. Sister Soledad Hilado, OSB, then Dean of College, could also wither you with a look. And sometime Prefect of Discipline, other times Dean of College, Sister Caridad Barrion, OSB can give you thunder and lightning. Yet they certainly were approachable. For the Agnesian-Scholastics it was nice to know she was a fellow Bicolana. But it did not help to know that she hailed from the ilustrado Locsin family of Albay, and the Manileña side of her belonged to the wealthy del Rosario and Locsin clans. There was nothing about her, though, to betray this, nothing of the snooty rich in the way she dealt with people, no name-dropping of the power elite. She was simple and unassuming, the students could see that. So what made them keep a wide and safe distance between her and themselves? She did not mince words. Neither did Sisters Caridad and Soledad and the German Sisters.

It was a great wonderment for all her students of the early 1960s that Sister Liguori and her secretary, the freshly graduated Miss Editha Halili, obviously got along pretty well. “Why should I be scared?” Editha (who much later became our Sister Amada) countered the question of a curious collegiate. Well, the two certainly had some things in common, like efficiency and one-liners. Editha’s one-liners, though, were of the humorous kind. It was a great relief to get called to the office and Miss Halili remained at her desk. It meant Sister Directress was not about to give you a dressing down.

But once she called Cecilia Gullas (yes, our former novice, of Sister Lia Dizon’s batch) and me to her office. Miss Halili was not there. Oh no, what have we done, we asked ourselves. Cecile was editor of the campus newspaper; I was her associate at the literary magazine. “What made you think you could publish just like that this book review?” Sister Liguori demanded. It was “Three Priests in Catholic Fiction,” condensed from a term paper I had written.

“Miss de Veyra,” Cecile stammered, she knew of Sister Liguori’s great esteem for SSC’s English teacher par excellence. “Miss de Veyra said it’s a cream-of-the-crop term paper and you don’t easily earn her praise. She gave it to me to publish.”

“You’re capable of mature writing, yes,” Sr. Liguori retorted. “But you’re too immature to write about fallen priests. You should have done your readership the courtesy of showing it first to the College Dean before going to press. She could have taught you a thing or two about perspective.” She dismissed us with a nod.

“Thank you, Sister Directress,” Cecile and I accepted the chastisement. She made sense. Sister Soledad could have shown me a perspective that Miss de Veyra as literary mentor didn’t have. Nowadays campus publication moderators let mediocre thought, poor language, blatant inaccuracies get into print for fear that the College Editors Guild of the Philippines (CEGP) will cry “Censorship!” They won’t if they’re serious and responsible journalists. As Miss de Veyra refused to accept anything that was not well-chiseled forging of thought, a hallmark of literary excellence, our Benedictine pillars of the educational apostolate insisted on character and perspective in opinion-making thought by students of a Catholic school. We should have another Sister Liguori to

teach Scholastican campus journalists and their mentors a thing or two about excellence in the forging of thought for social responsibility.

Those years it was impossible for students to think of Sister Liguori, Sister Caridad and Sister Soledad apart from one another. They constituted a 3-powers-that-be in school. The other seasoned educators then like Sister Ehrentrudis Eichinger, or Sister Paz Katigbak, Sister Scholastica Benitez or Sister Cecile Donato or Sister Gunfrida Mayer, together with lay teachers who were not mere employees but real mission partners like Miss Lourdes de Veyra, Mrs. Emma Rotor, Mr. Waldo Perfecto, Mrs. Gloria Quintos, Miss Remedios Salazar, Miss Lourdes Medalla, all of them were a We-Acting-As-An-I. This, to the students, was what community was all about. Privately or in concerted act they molded the Scholastican as a True and Finished Woman of Character enabled to think, judge and act constantly and consistently in the likeness of Christ. (Excerpt from a long statement that every Scholastican had to memorize like a pledge.)

It was under the watch of the Liguori-Caridad-Soledad Triumvirate that on the first day of school the Dean of College gathered the entire freshmen batch in the social hall and laid down the terms of the Honor System like a contract the breaching of which meant getting so ostracized by fellow students that one decided of her own accord to leave and transfer to another school.

It was also during those years of the 3-powers-that-be that one graced day the revered Sister Willibalda, the very first school head and with the longest term, suddenly appeared on campus. Scholasticans of the 1950s and '60s saw her for the first and last time. She was a tall, spontaneous German Sister even in old age, no imposing air about her. Walking into the Sacred Heart Courtyard she put her arms around the nearest college students standing around. Unlike the Grade School kids, the collegiates, who never experienced such a thing with their directress, did not know how to respond. In vain did Sister Soledad try to signal to Pilar Quintos with her eyes, *di makuha sa tingin*. In vain did Sister Caridad nudge to others, *di makuha sa siko*.

Go For It! Pushing the Limits of the Possible

“The first thing that comes to my mind when I think of Sister Liguori was ‘Go for it!’” Sister Fe Andrea Collantes, OSB recalls. “Like the time when we explored the idea of staging our first-ever serious drama at St. Cecilia’s Hall. We weren’t sure we could hack it.” It was big, self-sacrificing work and big expense for the school. Consulted by the aspiring thespians, Sister Liguori said, “Go for it!” Consequently, she mobilized institutional support. It was a tremendous success and she was really pleased. The play was the memorable “Bamboo Cross” that produced high caliber theatrical prowess and started a succession of annual stage plays that gave the school outstanding stage actors, stage managers and productions along the classic mold. “We were all in high spirits,” Sister Fe Andrea remembers. “We brought out the entire cast to celebrate, including the two scene-stealing little graders.

Coming in from the off-campus celebration they were called to the directress’ office. “I did not call you to congratulate you. I called you to tell you that you were wrong in taking out the graders without permission from their teachers, not considering their different circumstances,” Sister Liguori scolded. “It was nice of you to include them in your celebration. But you were wrong to get them out of class just like that. You are collegiate students. You have freer schedules and can even miss classes; it’s your look-out. But the graders are different.” Can you argue against that logic? Go

for it, yes, dare the untried and celebrate it. But do respect the boundaries founded on non-negotiable values.

In the mid 1960s Sister Liguori began a series of pushing the limits of the possible in varied arena that spanned more than two decades. After she took graduate studies in psychology she founded the Guidance Department of St. Scholastica's College. At the same time she had teaching assignments in General Education Psychology courses and in Bachelor of Science in Education courses like Tests and Measurements. She was vastly different this time. The highly disciplined classroom management was still very much there. But she had a decidedly relaxed and friendly way of dealing with the students. "Still we were all afraid of her," observed a former Psychology major student as self-confident as the zealous Ma. Lourdes Laurel Avancena. The seed Sister Liguori planted flourished and flowered in her soul. She came back after graduation to teach and continue a legacy of unstinting service as a guidance counselor though she did not need the job for her bread and butter.

"In I.Q. tests," Sister Liguori lectured, "when a student scores very high in language skills but hits bottom in math skills, teacher and guidance counselor need to look into the matter. Somewhere along the line the growth process got derailed. We should not stop at the scores." The veiled compassion, the particular interest in every student and in the wholistic development of the person, these were very much in place as in the previous years. This time it was more out in the open and equipped furthermore with a scientific grasp of the inner dynamics that factor into the maturing of the true and finished woman of character. No longer head of school she became even more laid back, her humility more marked.

Her former students who entered the convent saw a very different Sister Liguori. Sister Salvacion Umali, OSB, who was not her student, vividly remembers an interview preparatory to her entrance into the novitiate. "She had a stern exterior; I was scared of her. But soon her true self broke out. I saw how kind-hearted and caring she was. And her smile was so warm. Later when I'd meet her in the clausura she had the same warm smile." That smile transformed her features.

In the mid sixties she was in the front lines of *aggiornamento*, as laid back as was possible there, in that movement of opening windows to new winds blowing inaugurated by the beloved Pope John the 23rd. With greater vigor she searched the Scriptures, theological treatises, monastic tradition in the service of the Church's *aggiornamento*. During her years in Rome she was one of the most persistent in the research and documentation of the little known facts and features of our congregation's history that illuminate its traditions.

She dismissed the reservations of those afraid to uncover skeletons in the closet. She insisted on putting these in perspective, showing all the ensuing generations of Missionary Benedictines the utter giftiness of our congregation, the sole reason for its flourishing: God's grace, the divine scheme of things. She was correct. Every detail of the congregation's history unearthed fired up the young perpetually professed and Junior Sisters of the 1960s and '70s. It was the congregation's own *aggiornamento*. Sister Liguori's contribution to that congregational "opening of windows" was no little thing. The history, the traditions, Fr. Amrhein, Mother Birgitta, they continue to inspire.

Back in Manila years later, she was asked to direct a lengthy renewal program, initially called “tertianship.” It put together a large set of profession batches of young sisters, a set that she called “the priory’s cream of the crop” because it happened to include a large number of elected or appointed leaders, articulators of schools of thought, dynamos in ministry fields. When Sister Catherine Sanchez asked what really was a tertianship and why it was called such, Sister Liguori explained the meaning, connotations and implications of the term as conceptualized by its originators, the Jesuits. “So we are in reality non-tertians,” she concluded. Since then the priory’s largest ever batch of renewalists came to be known as the Non-Tertians.

Opening Windows to a Different Wind Blowing

Elsa Lava and her sisters were Scholasticans who knew a different Sister Liguori already in their student days still. For which reason they felt close to her. She often visited their father, Jesus Lava, serving term in prison for heading the old Communist Party (susmariosep!) of the Philippines. What exchanges of ideas, outlook, convictions, took place between those two the priory knew nothing about. She never talked about it, just as she never talked about her family. Elsa knew Sister Liguori brought her father three volumes of the Summa Theologica. He really pored over it.

Still full of energy even as she advanced in age she set up a small development project in the slums of Leveriza. In the early 1970s the young Sisters were delighted to learn that to her list of most admired VIPs she had added the Latin American revolutionary leader, Che Guevara. Asked how come, she held up a book, “You can only know why if you read it here. Transferred to Marikina, she established the Tuason Community Center Foundation, Inc. (TCCFI) and took the helm as its first executive director. Her Tuason relatives contributed significantly to its fund.

Poor health did not allow her to be in office everyday nor get into the thick of activities. But she closely monitored everything via intercom. She was fully present to the staff and their second-liners from among the people served. Lengthly times of enforced bed rest confined only her body, not her missionary spirit. Its energy, both spiritual and material, never diminished. It was the prime mover behind-the-scenes of TCCFI. Excellence for social responsibility as St. Benedict practiced it, she too practiced without much ado even before it became a catch phrase in our schools in the 1980s.

She not only served the people, identified as the anawim of the society, whether of Leveriza, Malate or Parang of Marikina. She served their interests as a social class. To the beleaguered Benedictine social activists, a religious or lay, she was a silent bastion of moral support, dealing out only her characteristic one-liners. Activists made a beaten path to her door, among them, Sister Christine Tan, RGS, usually accompanied by Mercy Arrastia Tuason and Bea Zobel. Again only the discerning observed this. She fretted when the Priory’s activists neglected to visit. She milked them for a wide-array of information on what was going on, including the classified ones. Holding a profound grasp of the theological, pastoral and ethical foundations of Benedictine crisis intervention into the society along with the poor, she plied the activists with questions on the theoretical foundations and ethical norms of specific organizations, groupie networks, the Light a Fire Movement, political centers – Net Dems, Soc Dems, “Sock-it-to-dem.” She wanted to know shifts in the political spectrum.

It was marvelous how from an infirmary bed she kept track of the temper of the mass movements, the ebb and flow of the tumultuous People Power that started to build up in 1975 and really alarmed Marcos in 1978. Every small victory she applauded with a low chuckle. Eventually the activists found out that she always ended up each private, separate session with her by asking in all seriousness, “So will I live to see the revolution victorious?” She did, but only for a “One Brief Shining Moment” victory. She rued but understood why President’s Cory’s Camelot quickly got snuffed out.

Coming Full Circle

The beginnings of a cardiac problem weakened her body while she was still active in the social apostolate. She took it in stride with her wry sense of humor. “The doctor gave me exercises with machines that made me look like I was dancing the tinkling, he he!” she remarked once. But the sense of humor did not always hold as her illness progressed and confined her more and more to her bed. She took up crocheting as therapy and surprised us with exquisitely feminine items or a snazzy lady’s blouse. We couldn’t imagine a Sister Liguori doing this but we saw her at it with our own eyes.

As a student herself she must have done well not only in academics but also in the vocational subjects, home arts and crafts. It was rumored Emma del Rosario was a lively, fun-loving young girl before she became the formidable Sister Liguori. We can only speculate. Self-effacing, she never talked about herself or her family, her childhood, her growing up years. In the convent she never allowed her community to hear her beautiful, tremulous voice. Only her nearest neighbor in choir heard it. Her date of birth into this earth or into the next life, what does that matter in the light of the Nunc Fluens” (the Flowing Now) otherwise known as eternity?

As she prepared to pass on to endless life and light the mood was tranquility, the emotion was a quiet joy. As we prepared to lay her down into the earth she must have been saying, “Pass my body on to Mother Earth without emotion. “How can it be without emotion?” said one Sister who collided with another, both blinded by tears.

“Soy contenta,” she had lapsed back into the language of her childhood. Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven. She had come full circle. Like a trusting quietly happy child she was contented with the divine scheme of things. Or in the language of the poet Robert Browning,

“God’s in his heaven; all’s well with the world.”