



St. Scholastica's College  
Manila

is proud to announce the recipient of the 2015 Pax Award,

*Sr. Mary Bellarmine Bernas, OSB*



AB CHEMISTRY 1960  
AB ELEMENTARY EDUCATION 1964

INNOVATOR, EDUCATOR, WRITER, ARTIST...

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## PAX AWARD 2015 RESPONSE

By Sr. Mary Bellarmine Bernas, OSB

Mother Prioress Adelaida Ygrubay, OSB and the Benedictine Sisters and members of the Corporation,

Dr. Jose Sandejas and members of the Board of Trustees,

Sister President Mary Frances Dizon, OSB and members of the President's Council,

Administrators, Faculty, Members of the Scholastican Community,

Parents, Guests and Graduating Students.

Today is some kind of a homecoming for me. Yes, it has been many years since I stood before an audience of Scholasticans like you.

When I entered the convent in 1960, I envisioned myself as following the footsteps of the Sisters whom I met in College – Sr. Liguori, Sr. Soledad, Sr. Caridad and many others. At that time, I thought being a Benedictine Sister meant teaching within the convent walls of Leon Guinto or teaching somewhere in any of the then 9 stations of the Philippine Priory. I thought there would be lots of time for prayer and singing the Gregorian Chant.

When asked whether I wanted to teach Chemistry, my major, in College, I chose instead to teach in the Grade School.

It seemed so easy. I didn't have to go far for my first job. It was right there, a breath away from the clausura.

I taught Science, Language Arts and Religion in the grade school department of St. Scholastica's College. It wasn't just near home. It WAS HOME , all right.

After my graduate studies at the Ateneo, however, I got my feet wet in the principalship of the grade school. This was my first big assignment. As Charles Dickens might have said," it was the best of times and it was the worst of times."

The year was 1973 and the Grade School had just finished and passed its formal PAASCU survey. It was the first school for girls in the Philippines to be accredited administer after a successful accreditation visit is like winning a jack pot. I think you all know what I mean. I was young. I was strong and healthy. I had just finished my M. A. And I was to administer a newly accredited school. What more could I ask for?

But I soon learned that I had spoken too soon. For it was the beginning of an age of CHANGE. And my optimism soon faded as I faced the challenge of CHANGE. Martial law had just begun. Work in the underground was accelerating throughout the country. It was no better in the rest of the world. It seemed as though the only constant thing in our life was CHANGE. That made it the worst of times.

For almost a decade after that, the grade school embarked on **an** odyssey of CHANGE. The leadership of the first three years was in my hands.

The call of the times was to revolutionize schooling, changing our focus

from the class to the individual,

from norm to criterion,

from structure to unstructure and non-gradedness

and from teacher-centered teaching to student –centered teaching and activity.

The public schools and the smaller schools could take their blessed time. But not the leader schools! Certainly, not St. Scholastica's Grade School! I was almost sorry we had gotten accredited so fast. The grade school department rolled up their sleeves and got to work, holding our banner high while we shivered in our shoes.

The first decision I had to make was to decide that we would not completely individualize instruction. We called our approach SMALL GROUP INSTRUCTION WITH INDIVIDUAL PACING. That, of course made us different and our innovation, doable.

Step by step, we went, training our teachers at the same time that we were revising curricula , preparing manuals and writing the drafts of learning modules on soap boxes, changing

furniture, and hardest of all, CHANGING MINDSETS. There is a saying, and our college administrators and teachers will surely agree with me, that it is easier to move a cemetery than an existing curriculum.

In the absence of local models, we turned to each other for wisdom and ideas, critiquing each other's work and seeking affirmation from one another, never minding the wall of resistance all around us.

I had a faculty of roughly a hundred people, from all kinds of teacher training schools and from all walks of life. But those 3 years made us one and the struggle gave us memories to last all of us a lifetime. Truly, it was an odyssey of caring and believing in one another.

And I learned that leadership was like that. You did not plan for leadership. You do it bit by bit, your faith in your heart and a smile upon your lips even when your knees are shaking beneath your habit. I used to have a Degas painting of a ballerina taking a bow onstage. I often told my teachers. "No matter how much chaos we have backstage, we must always come out like this: confident, graceful and smiling."

And though they must have feared me and cursed me a hundred times over, I knew they were sorry to see me go to take my doctorate at Stanford University after those years.

Little did I know that in my administrative history, that would only be the beginning. . .

For it was a case of, "After Stanford, the deluge!"

When I arrived from Stanford and assumed the Presidency of St Scholastica's College in October, 1991 the agenda of the day was the rude awakening among our students to the reality of a society governed by injustice, deception and cruelty. The only answer was "CHANGE! And our students, along with so many others shouted this from the rooftops as they left their classrooms to join rallies and demonstrations, willing to give their young lives that others may live.

The military looked suspiciously at our school assemblies and our socio-cultural activities. Tent lectures replaced the order and the disciplined silence of our classrooms and libraries. Bloodstained questions flew about the air while we, the teachers and school heads groped for answers and could not find them. A little known fact about me was that I was issued a warrant of arrest shortly before I returned to the Philippines, even before I was officially installed as President.

As President of the school, my most difficult task was that of decision-making under a repressive regime. The risks of involvement were great. Greater still the decision to take those risks. It is a principle of management to make decisions only when you have your data

complete. But many times, decisions could not wait so long. Yet, the accountability was the same.

I can still remember how in the first five years of my presidency, we the Sisters had to live through so many conflicts and ambiguities as an institution of learning. How tough were the questions posed before us, questions like:

How do we teach critical thinking without access to the truth, where freedom of the press is suppressed?

How do we reconcile the thrust for the poor against the ruthless consumerism that was the order of the day?

How does a school straddle the thin line between critical collaboration and activism and subversion?

Fortunately, our older Sisters who came before us served as our inspiration and support. I looked back at the example of the lives of our Sisters who were faith-filled and who instilled in us the importance of discipline and hard work and embodied what we now glibly call a life of Ora et Labora. Through their example and dedication of doing all for God and not for any selfish ambition, we could weather all those storms.

And after those difficult days came the Woman Question. I used to wonder, sometimes, which was harder to tackle: the slavery of an oppressive regime or the slavery women impose upon themselves and their daughters.

My eleven years of Presidency went by filled with moments of historic significance. They were the Cory years filled with choices no one ever thought a school head would have to make. They were years that demanded a new image of the Scholastican, from the obedient and faithful wife and mother to the woman with a tough mind and a tender heart, fighting fearlessly for the things she believed in. A no guts no glory time for everyone.

And as though that was not enough, to top it all, a school strike which lasted for 3 years! Again, it was a test of our strength and our mettle. It was as though something or someone was out to tear down the ideals and the dreams of many years. Three years later, we received the decision of the Supreme Court. The Strike was over. The school had won the case.

My dear graduates, I have spoken of a world that existed before you came into the world. But really, the world has not CHANGED much. The problems I have spoken about are still there though those who inflict them upon us may be different. St. Scholastica's still stands in the inner-city of Metro Manila along Leon Guinto Street.

Dear graduates, you are no different from those Scholasticans who still belong to that wide range of elite and non-elite who through more than a hundred years have heard our Benedictine response to a troubled world.

I may be different from you now. But once upon a time, I, too, listened to someone who said I could help to make a better world to live in.

I listened in the way St. Benedict invites us all to listen: I listened with the ear of my heart. I prayed and worked that those whose footsteps God's love may lead to us may find the answers to the questions we too asked once upon a time.

The world will always be a world of good and evil.

There will always be tasks given that seem impossible to do.

There will always be questions no one can answer for you.

There will be realities you will find hard to reconcile.

My dear graduates, be a woman for your day.

That is what it means to be a Scholastican.

Congratulations.