

Redeeming Ourselves from the Agony

Fr. Dwight dela Torre

At Holy Week specially during the triduum, the three days of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter, Christians the world over recall and commemorate the passion and death of Jesus of Nazareth on the cross – that horrible instrument of state terrorism – but at whose resurrection turned the world upside down and the cross into a symbol of salvation.

In some countries, it is more subdued. In others, it is more elaborate. In some parts of the Philippines, people seek crucifixion in atonement for some sins committed or as a seal for a promise kept.

As if loneliness, discrimination and harsh working conditions are not enough for migrant workers, the current global economic disaster that threatens their jobs have added to their litany of agonies.

Specifically, a foreign domestic worker (FDWs), on a personal level, has to contend with the pain and loneliness of separation from their loved ones as well as the guilt of leaving them behind. Added to these

are the pains and shame of broken relationships, disappointments and sense of failure if a child fails in school, gets hooked on drugs or becomes pregnant.

Coupled to these are the discrimination they experience in the receiving country (Chip Tsao's article in HK Magazine is the latest in Hong Kong and Bridget Saunder's in New Zealand), long working hours, and the oftentimes harsh and cruel treatment they receive from their employers. The litany can go on and on and sometimes one feels that there seems to be no end to these.

The First Whips

On a structural level, Filipino migrant workers have to contend with the Philippine government's anti migrant policies, two of which have been recently imposed.

First is the Philippine Overseas Employment Agency (POEA) Guidelines for House Service Workers (HSW's) issued on December 2006 which is more known as No Placement Fee Policy.

This nullified Memo Circular 34 issued by then Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) Secretary Leonardo Quisumbing stipulating the ceiling for placement fee as equivalent to one month's salary.

The Guidelines for HSW, at first glance, appears laudable but it made claims more difficult against the recruitment agencies as stipulated by the flawed Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995.

Recruitment agencies still demand, in defiance of that ceiling, around Php100,000 for a Filipino domestic's job in Hong Kong. However, this charges are not called placement fees. In effect, the No Placement Fee Policy institutionalizes protection of unscrupulous recruitment agencies.

The second policy that has a dastardly effect on migrant workers is the Direct Hiring Ban issued by the DOLE. This policy feeds the migrant workers right into the lion's mouth of unscrupulous recruitment agencies.

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The Carrying of the Cross

Apart from these anti-migrant policies of their own government, anti-migrant policies are also in place in receiving countries, most glaring of which in Hong Kong are the “two-week rule” and the policy prohibiting FDWs from becoming residents despite their length of stay here.

The two-week rule allows the FDW only two weeks’ stay in Hong Kong upon the early termination of contract as long as the 14 days is shorter than the expiry date of the visa.

Other migrants are not subject to these policies. These are simply, and blatantly, discriminatory.

Redeeming Ourselves

Jesus’ resurrection has radicalized the meaning of the cross.

It is no longer a symbol of state terrorism. It is now for Christians the symbol of salvation. As symbols point to a reality beyond themselves, the cross, as we recall the passion, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, invites us to think of the contradictions it offers.

On one hand, the cross in the church, as Jurgen Moltmann in his *The Crucified God* (1974) wrote, “...points to the God who was crucified, not between two candles on an altar, but between two thieves in the place of skull, where the outcasts belong, outside the gates of the city... It is a symbol which therefore leads out of the church and out of religious longing into the fellowship of the oppressed and the abandoned. On the other hand, it is a symbol which calls the oppressed and the godless into the church,



and through the church into the fellowship of the crucified God.” (p.40)

The April 5 march and many marches before that are no longer just joined by secular groups. More Christian organizations are joining.

There was a time when more people thought that by participating in these

marches is mixing religion with politics. Now, more Christians realize that to make the reality of their faith a present reality in our society is to aggressively act in the name of Jesus who was once was a victim of state (and religion) and be in solidarity with the present victims of the state, specially the migrant workers. 🇵🇭



A Sung Mass at the St. Maria’s Anglican Church in Causeway Bay, Hong Kong at 5:30PM was held on March 21 to celebrate the 10th year anniversary of the Anglican Women’s League.

The mass was held right after the League had their general meeting in the same parish. A banquet dinner was served in a

Anglican Women’s League Celebrates 10th Anniversary

nearby Chinese restaurant afterwards.

More than 500 well-wishers, members and Anglican church leaders, representatives of partner welfare agencies, which the League had supported in years, individual friends, church organizations and the Anglican clergy led by

Archbishop Paul Kwong and Retired Archbishop Peter Kwong shared the events with them.

Led by the very active Mrs. Betty Chan, the rest of the equally active and responsible officers of the Anglican Women’s League stirred the day’s joyful event.

Thanksgiving on the Mission's 28th Year



The Mission for Migrant Workers celebrated its 28th Anniversary on March 15, 2009.

A Thanksgiving Eucharist was held at St. John's Cathedral and attended by members of various organizations, friends and supporters of the MFMW and those whom the MFMW has helped.

Fr. Dwight de la Torre, MFMW's chaplain, was the celebrant while Dean Andrew Chan delivered the Homily. Members of the Mission Volunteers (MOVERS) and

MFMW staff did the Readings and Offertory.

Cynthia Abdon-Tellez, MFMW's director, thanked all the groups whom they have worked with and all the donors and supporters who have been instrumental in their continued existence in HK.

She also thanked St. John's Cathedral who has provided them a "home" since 1981.

It was a simple celebration with wine and chips served after the Service. 🍷

Know Your Rights Seminar in Tai Po

The Association of Righteous Migrants Society (ARMS) organized a Know Your Rights Seminar attended by around 40 members and officers of their organization on April 4 in Tai Po, New Territories.

The seminar was facilitated by Cynthia CA Tellez, Director of the Mission For Migrant Workers (HK) Limited.

The seminar was held in light of the group's concern that their members are not fully aware of their rights and other issues that affect them. Their place of work is too far from Central, where most of the migrant workers congregate.

The Know -Your-Rights Seminar is one of

the basic training seminars that the Mission is providing to foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong.

This would provide them a basic understanding of the employment contract under the Employment Ordinance in HK and Immigration policies related to their employment.

The group expressed their appreciation and willingness to undergo other training seminars especially the Leadership Training Seminar.

In doing so, they would be able to serve other migrants especially their members when faced with problems and difficulties in dealing with their everyday lives. 🍷

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Mission Volunteers (MOVERS) 3rd General Assembly

2 PM, David Kwok Room
St. John's Cathedral,
Central

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International Labor Day

1 May 2009

*Organized by the Asian
Migrants Coordinating
Body*

Know your Rights Seminar

May 10 and 17,
2-6 PM, David Kwok
Room

My name is Mariani. I was born in West Sumatra, Indonesia. I am the fourth among six children. I only finished primary school.

When I was 17, my parents decided to marry me to a 27-year old man. He works in a construction site, which takes seven days to reach. He only earns HK\$351 a month.

After a year, I gave birth to a baby girl. I decided to work as a domestic helper overseas to help my parents and my own family.

In Singapore

I worked in Singapore from 2001 to 2002. I was told to pay the agency fee through salary deduction for six months.

My employer gave the equivalent of my 6 months' salary to the agency. The following six months, my employer did not give me anything. I asked for it but she sent me straight to the airport to Indonesia as a reply. She only gave me my three months salary (already converted to Indonesian rupees).

In Saudi Arabia

From 2002 – 2005, I worked in Saudi Arabia. I paid about HK\$400 for agency fee.

This time, my employer kept my salary and only gave it me after I finished my contract. After I finished my third year, I decided to take my home leave so I asked for my one-year salary but was given only eight months' worth. They told me that I can only get the remaining once I return to Saudi Arabia.

After a while, my employer called to ask if I were going to return to Saudi Arabia. I told them that I will only return if they send me my unpaid wages. They only sent my two-months salary.

I sought advice from my agency but was told that they were not good. I decided not to go back.

In Hong Kong

I applied in Hong Kong and was hired by a Vietnamese resident.

Again, I paid the agency \$21,000.00 payable in seven months. My employer also kept my salary after paying the agency. They allowed me a rest day but deducted HK\$122 from my salary every time. I did not have statutory holidays as well.

After a year, I requested for my salary but was told that it will be delayed.

Then my employer's daughter contracted chicken pox and I was infected. I requested to see a doctor but they told me to wait until their daughter recovers. They also told me that I will have to pay my own medical fees if I insist to see a doctor.

I decided against their refusal and saw a doctor. The following day, they brought me to the agency office without paying my labor claims.

I filed my claims at the Labour Department and Labour Tribunal. My employer however did not appear to award my claim. I was then advised to file for the enforcement of the award order but was told that I am the




Learning to Stand Up

The Story of Mariani Slamet

third person claiming against my former employer, who declared bankruptcy.

I then accepted their offer to pay without interest from the Insolvency Fund. I was issued a crossed cheque of HK\$17,234.46 but I could not deposit or encash it as I have no address. I returned the cheque in December 2008 and asked for a cash cheque. They said it will take another three months for the cheque replacement.

In Bethune House

While waiting, I have learned from the Bethune House, my home for the past months. While helping me with the case, they also taught me to speak English and Cantonese, cross-stitching and dance. I also learned about my rights as a migrant worker by accompanying my fellow residents (what we call those living in Bethune House). My family and friends always tell me to be patient and I was. My advice to my fellow Indonesians is to be patient and have more power to fight for their rights. 

Thai Community Celebrates Songkran Festival

The Thai community in Hong Kong celebrated the SONGKRAN festival (also known as Thai New Year) in Kowloon City last March 29.

The festival aimed to strengthen the unity among Thai migrant workers, promote the Thai culture and enhance solidarity with other nationalities.

Organized by the Thai Regional Alliance, the 2009 Songkran Festival was highlighted by a community parade attended by around 500 Thai and local people.

There was the traditional drenching of water on the people as both paraders and expectators joined in the noise and fun.

Several activities were held. This included the Songkran Parade, Buddha Bathing,



Celebrating Songkran, Spreading Solidarity. Leaders and members of various Thai migrant organizations in Hong Kong celebrated the Songkran Festival together with local Hong Kong people in Kowloon City.

Elderly Bathing and the Miss Songkran 2009 beauty pageant.

Mr. Chalam, a popular artist from Northeast Thailand, was invited to perform. Apparently, most of the Thai migrants in Hong Kong came from the Northeast.

Organizations like Friends of

Thai and Thai Women Association also participated in the event.

Thai Regional Alliance is a member of the Asian Migrant Coordinating Body (AMCB), an alliance of migrant organizations from Nepal, Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka and Philippines. 

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CHINA



MIGRANT FOCUS

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