

# ADVENT MEDITATION: ON SMALL THINGS

Rev. Fr. Angel Aparicio, O.P.

**The Wounded Healer.** (This title is borrowed from the book by Henri J.M. Nouwen, "The Wounded Healer," originally published by Doubleday, 1972)

I begin to write with sadness. I hurt, not knowing exactly why. It seems that forty years have come to nothing. Like Moses in his journey through the desert. We see him alone on the heights of mount Nebo looking into the land of promise (Dt 34:1). *Yahweh showed him the whole country... and told him, "This is the country which I promised on oath to give to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, saying: I shall give it to your descendants. I have allowed you to see it for yourself, but you will not cross into it."* Looking into the horizon one wonders, where is the Promised Land? The mysterious words of Saint John of the Cross written while in his prison cell in Toledo echo in one's heart. John's horizon was a hole in the ceiling of his prison cell. In a small piece of paper, he scribbled 37 strophes of his Canticle, the supreme expression of Spanish poetry and of mystical experience:

<i>Where have You hidden</i>	<i>¿Adónde te escondiste,</i>
<i>Beloved, and left me</i>	<i>Amado, y me dejaste</i>
<i>moaning?</i>	<i>con gemido?</i>
<i>You fled like the deer</i>	<i>Como el ciervo huiste;</i>
<i>After wounding me, and you were gone.</i>	<i>Habiéndome herido, y eras ido.</i>

These verses of the first strophe of the Canticle transcend a pedestrian reading. They are sublime, but the question remains: was it worthwhile, was it necessary for his religious brothers to keep John of the Cross in a horrible prison cell for nine months? What offence had he caused the Carmelite Order? *The little friar, the half friar*, as his friend/mentor, Saint Theresa de Jesus used to address him. Was it also due to the jealousy of his Israelite people that Moses could not set foot on holy land?

We are more civilized. Or so, it seems. We would have granted Moses the privilege to take a further step and kiss the ground of the Holy Land. We might have been more tolerant than John's fellow Carmelites. Really? Forty years in the Philippines have taught me a few things: a paradise? desert? prison? Was it worthwhile? Judge it yourselves. The circumstances of life have brought me to the Philippines. I am a Spaniard, I am a Dominican, I am a missionary. The Holy Rosary Province of the Order of Preachers was founded for the missions of the Orient, and the Philippines ever since has been its field of action. Therefore, *here am I, Lord I came to do your will!* Like the poor little boy Samuel repeating the words that his mentor, the Grand Priest Heli, had told him to answer if he would hear voices again in the middle of the night. There were other boys in my town, there were other aspirants to the priesthood in our seminary, there were other Dominicans in my convent, there... then, Why me? Why the Philippines?

Perhaps I was deluded? What voices did I hear?

*Tell us about Manila*, my father would say to me a thousand times, *about its people, its way of life, their towns and cities, etc.* Like the scouts sent by Moses to explore the land of Canaan, I would speak about the beautiful things of this marvelous country. This is paradise. *"We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. But the people who live there are..."* The land was all right, but its men did not differ much from the Egyptians they had left behind. The Philippines is beautiful, yes. What about its people?

Son, my father would add, *how many times you must have walked in the same places that your grandmother did as a child. They called her "blanquita (puti)." Do they still use these words over there?*

*Sometimes, papa*, I would answer. And then, he would proceed with the story of his mother, Lola Agripina, the *puti*.

I was four years old when *abuela* Agripina died of a stroke. It is the first death I remember and that is all I remember of her, dressed in black, lying motionless on the porch of the house, my aunties crying. When somebody dies in a little village—it happened then and it happens now— there is a pause filled by the event: Even the air, the noises, the hustle, and bustle, all acquire a distinctive physiognomy. It is something similar to what happens on Holy Friday, when you eat, drink, fast, go to church. You go through all the motions of life, but you are absent, like in a dream. They buried her. I was

not allowed to go to the cemetery to see where they would lay her to rest, not even to the church. She used to hug her little *nieto* (grandchild) every day after school hours when I passed by to greet her.

The father of Lola Agripina, Melchior, was a soldier, assigned to the Philippines at the end of the nineteenth century. Much was taking place in the three-hundred-year-old Spanish colony (*La Perla del Oriente*) at the end of the nineteenth century. He brought his family along with him. When hostilities broke up between the revolutionaries and the Spanish forces, he was taken prisoner by the Tagalogs. They held him in a fort somewhere in Luzon, waiting for his destiny. When his wife came to know about it, she boldly went to the leader of the revolutionaries. *If you kill my husband, I will kill ten Filipinos!* she told them. According to my father, the Filipinos were so impressed by her courage that they set Captain Melchior free. *What a character! Very noble those Filipinos!* My father relished this story.

Each one has his own battles to talk about. Back in June 1979, I left Spain, destined for the Philippines. This was a different war! As I was in the Madrid airport waiting for my flight, a Dominican who had just arrived from Manila, came to greet me. I did not know him. He did not know me either. From what I now recall, he could not believe that there was still someone willing to go to UST in the prevailing circumstances. He wanted to see it with his own eyes. *Yes, Fr. Magin, this is Fr. Angel, the last Spanish friar of the Philippines.*

Later, I came to know that Father Magin Borrajo had undergone not a small amount of pressure from some fellow Dominican professors of the Faculty of Theology of UST. Letters had been circulated accusing him of teaching unorthodox doctrine. (At that time, the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* of Paul VI was hotly debated in Catholic Schools of Theology). In hindsight, however it appears that he was a victim of a subliminal war aimed to undermine the influence of young *progressive* Spanish Dominicans in the Faculty of Theology. Yes, a different war. Eventually, Fr. Magin left the Order and the priesthood, and got married, like many other priests under similar circumstances.

Was this an omen, or was it a warning?

I travelled with a light baggage, formally and materially speaking. After finishing my Biblical studies in Rome and in Jerusalem, I spent one year in Oxford perfecting my English and doing some research for my dissertation:

*Textual Analysis of the Hebrew Translation of the Gospel According to Matthew, by Ben Shem Tov, a Medieval Spanish Jew, Poet and Scholar.*

*Prepare and leave for Manila*, I was told. I did not offer any resistance. I had been trained to obediently accept the orders of my superiors. I was young and inexperienced, a bit illusory perhaps. At the time, nobody could have prevented an idealistic young man from proceeding with his mission to save souls in the Philippines, or in the moon, for that matter. The Philippines represented a vast horizon, indeed a bright and promising future. In hindsight, however, the encounter with Fr. Magin loomed larger than one could have imagined at the time.

My former companions of studies in Madrid and in Rome welcomed and supported me wholeheartedly. "*El Joven*," they called me. They showed me around, introduced me to the country, to different people, to life in the community, and in the campus. I was impressed by the University of Santo Tomas. How important to be associated with this venerable institution. Being a Dominican, a professor at UST, has been the best letter of presentation anywhere in the land, in whatever circle of society. *Fr. Angel Aparicio, professor at UST!* Doors automatically open to you, no matter how insignificant or unimportant you are. Wow! All were smiles, the famous Filipino smile.

Immediately, upon my arrival I was assigned to teach Greek in the Faculty of Theology. What an irony: a Spanish friar teaching Greek to Filipinos in English. I had been hurried to catch up with the beginning of classes in June of that year. No time to adjust to the culture, to the language of the country, to the new environment. *Don't you worry*, they said, *tell them about the centers where you have studied*. It worked, somehow. In hindsight though, I shudder. I was fooled. What about my students? Impressed? Depressed? Teaching Greek and other courses for forty years without interruption looks impressive. One feels proud, having contributed the proverbial grain of salt to the formation of more than one thousand priests, scattered throughout the archipelago, some of them occupying important positions in the Church, others, simple pastors.

In the meantime, the Hebrew text of the Gospel of Matthew must lie somewhere, waiting to be rescued by a luckier researcher. Could I have made any contribution to biblical science with this dissertation? Hardly so. But it hurts, to exchange plans of crowning your career with a Doctor's diploma in Holy Scriptures for a humble role in the teaching of elementary Greek. I remember sharing this frustration with Fr. Marie Emile Boismard,

O.P., one of my idols at the Ecole Biblique et Archeologique Francoise in Jerusalem. *Do your mission, the old good father told me, forget about your dissertation, leave the research to us who have the time and the means to do it. Your job is to teach in a Faculty of Theology, teach future priests, that will be your contribution to the mission.* Thank you my beloved professor! The advice of Fr. Boismard has sustained and helped me to negotiate some of my frustrations as a teacher.

#### **Carretera Autonómica 2124.**

From Buenavista to La Puebla de Valdivia, a back and forth road, only three kilometers. This is the last lap of numberless trips returning home. From La Puebla to Buenavista, and beyond, the first step of a tearful return to the fields of mission. This morning the road looked like those blackboards we used in school at a time without texts or notebooks, when Don Julio, a very efficient *Maestro de Pueblo* (the village teacher), with military discipline, tried to inculcate the three “Rs” into little heads: seventy wild village boys, 6 to 14 years old. Thank God, after grade sixth I was recruited by Fr. Santiago Gonzalez, O.P. for the *Colegio de Dominicos de Arcas Reales*, in Valladolid. Away from home, family, and friends, but open to new horizons. Five hundred boys from the most varied backgrounds of the vast Spanish provinces. *A nursery for vocations*—that is how it was called by the most enthusiastic friars. It was not easy to adjust to the environment of a strict boarding school, with a rigorous half-religious, half-military discipline. The rod of Don Julio was worse. O marvelous days of penury and joy, our poor and happy childhood!

As I retrace my steps from Buenavista to La Puebla, I ponder, “*Is He the same God, the one switching on the air conditioning over this immense plain of Castile, and the one who dropped seven thousand islands in the middle of the Pacific Ocean?*” In the foreground, three snow-capped peaks (Curavacas, Espiguete, Penaredonda) touch the sky and distribute the waters between green and arid Spain. We lived on this side, in a small farming village. Life was marked by the seasonal routines of planting, harvesting, caring for our best friends: cows and oxen, goats and sheep, horses and donkeys, bees. In hindsight, it seems it was easier to deal with these than with fellow human. Nonetheless, there was peace and respect between neighbors. Disputes might reach high pitch, seldom fists. The recently ended civil war had tempered, at least externally, the most bellicose characters. Anger was kept inside the family, or inside the chest. One could hear a lonely plowman singing, a

shepherd whistling or a child crying, a woman screaming, not understanding why God had allowed her child to die, and in the long nights of winter, old stories. Community unwritten laws were generally respected, while social life moved around the church, the school, the bar, the public laundry spaces, the traditional gossiping locales. A helping hand would never fail a mother to care for the children, or a laborer to finish his task, or a friend to dig the tomb of his folks. Political lines were not transgressed, and differences could be guessed at but not verbalized publicly, only whispered among the like-minded. They say that we were living under a dictatorship, although I did not know it then.

Spreading through the provinces of Leon, Zamora, Salamanca, to Palencia, Valladolid, Avila, Segovia, Burgos, and Soria, the vast center-north of Spain is Old Castile, and at its heart is *Tierra de Campos* (*Campus Gothicus*), thus called since the invasion of the Iberian Peninsula by the German Gothic tribes. The granary of Spain: barley, common rye, oats, and predominantly wheat. Aileen, my Filipina friend called them *golden fields*, when she first travelled from Santiago de Compostela in Galicia to Palencia. I wonder how she was able to find her way to this place, a hidden hamlet in the multiple valleys of the region. The morning light tenderly caresses the ears of barley and the stalks of wheat; it is harvest season. Thanks to mechanization, rural life has undergone a complete transformation. In a week or so it will be over. Not so in old times, when we spent three infernal months laboring for a meagre yearly sustenance. When asked about the climatological conditions of our place, my late father used to say in a play of the words *infierno* (hell) and *invierno* (winter): *Tres meses de invierno y nueve de infierno*. Of course, there was a lull of sweet autumn and joyful spring in between. And there was joy!

I walk through these fields of my childhood as a stranger in his own homeland, lands of undulating hills, valleys where three rivers flow, the Riocoron (river of the horn, for the vast pastures for horn animals), Rio Boedo (or of the oxen), and Rio Valdavia (river by the road). Between poplars and white willow trees, wild roses, and mulberry shrubs. What a joy! Under the shadow of majestic oak trees, I rehearse the words of poet Antonio Machado,

*This is Castile, mystical and warlike,  
Old, gentle Castile, humble and brave  
Castile of disdain, Castile of strength  
O land of my birth! I remember  
songs of early childhood  
in images of rain and snow,  
in sounds of bells and peasants' shouts.*

*(Canto a Castilla, XXIX).*

Children running to school, wandering through verdant meadows, picking  
up battles between  
different factions... or lavender and other wildflowers to adorn the altars for  
the Corpus Christi  
procession...

This is a different race, a different procession. How many times did  
I set on this road, back and forth? As a child, as a boy, as a friar, as a son?  
La Puebla, Buenavista, Polvorosa, Renedo... Palencia, Madrid... Roma,  
Jerusalén, Oxford, Manila. Yes, La Puebla, Buenavista, and beyond. When  
the last house disappears from sight, I take a last glance: on the left side I see  
the little hermitage of Our Lady of Carmel along the road, and I address a  
short prayer to our heavenly mother:

Virgencita del Carmen,  
huddling behind the grills of your little house  
You know about pain and separation.  
Guide this child through exile.  
Protect and keep him faithful to his call.  
One, two, three years, again?  
Watch over his old parents  
Left behind wiping their tears,  
Till he comes back  
One, two, three more years...  
To the final farewell.

*Do what he tells you, did I hear?*  
Like at Cana of Galilee  
I too, implore you,  
Entrust them to your Beloved Son.  
Do not allow me to forget them...  
Or you.  
Thank you, one and a thousand times.  
Amen.

On the other side of the road, along the Valdavia river, is *the garden of the sastre*. This is where my grandfather, Telesforo had invested his life, to transform a barren piece of land into a garden. Only God and those who live in and by the labor of their hands know what it takes ... But God is up in heaven, where farmers usually lift up their eyes out of hope, or despair. Who knows?

### **El Huerto del Sastre** (The Garden of the Tailor)

*El Soto* was a field by the left margins of the Valdavia river where seasonal floods had deposited tons and tons of gravel. My grandfather purchased it at a bargain, and with much hard work converted it into a fertile field. It took him and his children several years to weed out the stones and to replenish it with fertile soil. Water was channeled to the fields and the earth responded by bringing forth bountiful riches: potatoes, tomatoes, onions, peppers, cucumbers, all kinds of vegetables, cereals, and fruit trees, like apples, pears, artichokes, cherries, mulberries.

*El Soto* represents one obligatory visit whenever I return home. Every tree, every corner, every piece of soil evokes a memory. In my last visit on July 2018, I walked around the vast piece of land. It has been abandoned for a long time now. The river has made its inroads with gullies and stones. Fortunately, Grandfather does not see it anymore, or if he does, it is from a different perspective.

On a small, elevated, round platform, scattered on the ground lie some metal pieces, like the skeleton of a prediluvian creature. These are the remains of the *norria*. The well is still there, covered with stones and old wooden planks. Sitting in the shadow of the mulberry tree, I conjure



childhood memories of phantasms, voices, images, playing among light and shadow. The present generation are clueless. *Is this a noria? What is a noria?* Ah, yes, *there are those huge wheels in the park turning up and down while children seated on its benches squeal and shout.* As a child, I was fascinated by its mechanism. Even before coming close to it, one could hear the tick-tack of its wheel, as if it were an aquatic clock. A deep canal connected the river to the well from where the buckets collected the water. The *noria* of *El Soto* was different from the *norias* one can still see in the ancient city of Hama in the Orontes river, in Syria. But the purpose was the same, to transfer the water from a river or a well to a small aqueduct at the top of the wheel. The *noria* was usually dragged along by an animal, a donkey, or a horse, whose eyes were covered to prevent them from getting dizzy.

In her book *The Mansions*, Saint Teresa of Avila uses water as a metaphor for prayer:

*“I don’t find anything more appropriate to explain some spiritual experiences than water... And I am so fond of this element that I have observed it more attentively than other things. Let us consider, for a better understanding, that we see two founts with two water troughs. These two troughs are filled with water in different ways: with one the water comes from far away through many aqueducts and the use of much ingenuity; with the other the source of the water is right there; and the trough fills without any noise. If the spring is abundant, the water overflows once the trough is filled, forming a large stream. There is no need of any skill, nor does the building of aqueducts have to continue; but water is always flowing from the spring.*

*The water coming from the aqueducts is comparable, in my opinion, to the consolations I mentioned that are drawn from meditation. For we obtain them through thoughts, assisting ourselves, using creatures to help our meditation, and tiring the intellect. Since, in the end, the consolation comes through our own efforts, noise is made when there has to be some replenishing of the benefits the consolation causes in the soul as has been said.*

*With this other fount, the water comes from its own source which is God...”*

*(“The Interior Castle, The Fourth Dwelling Places,” *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D.*

and Otilio Rodriguez, ICS Publications, Washington, D. C. 1980, pp 323-324).

Most of us attain to prayer with certain difficulties. Writing this story, I feel like a donkey turning the *noria* around and around to bring some water to irrigate my dry spirit. Some ideas come easily; others take more effort.

Children were strictly forbidden to get near the *noria*. *Don't get closer, for the waters may call you*, was the admonition. But it was precisely this that made it more enticing, and when the elders turned their back we would clandestinely climb the platform and peep down into the water at the bottom of the pit. It was scary, straining our eyes through the narrow opening, illuminated by a thin beam of light. One would imagine an enormous depth. Sounds as of souls crying in purgatory... small creeping reptiles, salamanders we called them, lurking within the stone walls. One imagined moving figures, perhaps the shadows of our own little bodies as in the famous myth of the cavern by Plato. Next day, we felt very important, sharing our adventure with our school mates. They listened with open mouths, faces betraying jealousy.

Grandfather Telesforo was nicknamed *El Sastre (the tailor)*. I never saw him sewing clothes. According to my father, *El Abuelo Telesforo* served the friars for a few years in El Escorial, near Madrid (El Escorial is the famous mausoleum-monastery-school build by Felipe II in the sixteenth century). He intended to become an Augustinian. However, after a heated argument with the Father Superior, he left the convent. He was an obstinate young man, a heart without deception, a noble character. The cloister life, definitely, was not his calling. He enrolled in the army and became an officer in the Department of Communications. We used to play with the gadget he used to send messages in Morse Code. Soon he realized that military discipline was worse than cloister obedience. Sitting long hours with that instrument was not for him. He took a chance with dressmaking and migrated to France to apprentice in one of the fashion houses of Paris. On his return to Spain he settled in Barcelona, where he met and married the *Puti (La Abuela Agripina)*. Together they dreamt of setting up a shop in the fashion capital of Spain. They needed financial assistance, something his mother-in-law was not willing to provide. Disappointed he returned home where dressmaking did not offer a bright future. No place in a small village for *haute couture*. Dressing farmers, who only changed clothes on Sundays or when they had to travel to the city, he could not meet the needs of a growing family.

*El Sastre* finally settled down. Not as a friar, or as a soldier, or as a fashion designer. But his talents did not go to waste. He became the sacristan of the parish. Together with his children, he solemnized the liturgical celebrations. And he became a highly respected and feared town mayor perhaps. He was described to me thus: “*El Mejor Alcalde de La Puebla; during his incumbency all the roads were smooth.* He also sewed his children clothes. And, finally, he became a successful farmer. He purchased *El Soto* and through hard work he transformed it into a garden — “*El Huerto del Sastre,*” (the garden of the tailor). His children were called *Los Hijos del Sastre* (The children of the tailor): Consuelo, Alipio, Purificacion, Guadalupe, Alfonso.

### **The Old Solitary Oak Tree**

Alipio, my father, died peacefully at age 99, four months short of the centennial, like a patriarch surrounded by his children. The words of *Psalm 28* come to my lips, “*Blessed are those who fear the Lord, who walk in his ways... Your wife like a fruitful vine within your house, your sons like olive shoots around your table.*” Gathered around his death bed were Alfonso, Angel, Esther, Julio, Jose Luis, Fernando, Maria del Mar, Carlos, and Maria Jesus, six boys and three girls, together with Angeles, our loving mother. This was a grace for which I had been praying, to assist Papa in his last moments. It was December 28, 2017, the day of the Holy Innocents, a festival that he honored with his sense of humor and devotion, which I will never forget. The innocent little angels escorted him on his journey to Paradise.

People often ask me: *Why did you become a priest? Are you the only priest in your family?* My response is: *Yes and no. Well, let me explain. On my mother's side there are several. On my father's family, my great grandfather, my grandfather, my father, my elder brother—all gave it a try. But only I succeeded.* I often think, or say, quoting prophet Isaiah, “*from the womb of my mother you called me, Lord.*” But God's designs are inscrutable, and only in hindsight can they be articulated.

At twelve, my father entered the Capuchin's seminary in El Pardo, Madrid. How fondly he remembered his old days in the “convent!” An unfortunate accident changed his career. He fell down the stairs and broke his leg. The Capuchins, having no means of treating his broken leg, sent him home to be taken care of. This ended his dream. However, the good friars

became part of his imaginary. Often he would tell us stories about these loving friars, their down-to-earth homeliness and holiness. Listening to him enkindled my own dream. I was supposed to be a Capuchin... but I became a Dominican.

It is sunset on a cool May day. Under the canopy of a mighty oak tree at the top of a hill, I gaze at the Valdavia valley (my town is called La Puebla de Valdavia) wrapped in the evening mist.

These words surge up to my lips:

### *El Roble Solitario*

Today I climbed the hill  
Towards the solitary oak tree.  
I paused to listen to his whisper.  
I heard a voice,  
Speaking softly, slowly, unequivocally,  
The voice of *El Roble Solitario*.

The core of my heart quivered,  
My body became still.  
Under the solitary oak tree  
I had a dream:

*By the river of the oxen,  
Resting from the morning tasks,  
The two of us: the old man and the boy  
Under a canopy of willows and poplars,  
He, talking about life's labors,  
I, devotedly listening.*

By the solitary oak tree, I envisioned  
Grandfather Telesforo,  
Always straight, always pensive,  
Wounded, not defeated,  
Like *El Roble Solitario*.  
The day gets cooler, yet  
My feet, my hands,  
My heart sense the warmth of his words:

Yes.

— Farewell,

— Till next May.

— I will return.

Faithful to your call.

To live this dream

Of illusions?

To remember, to laugh, to sing

Beneath *El Roble Solitario*.

Down the hill I fly,

Impelled by a spirit,

The phantom of the old mighty tree.

Grandfather? Father?

On the horizon,

Father sun slowly sinks beneath red skies.

Spurred by a gelid wind,

I approach the green valley

While my lips murmur a prayer:

*Old and venerable oak tree,*

*Roble Solitario,*

*Blessed oak tree,*

*Remember me.*

*Solitary, centenary, wounded, pensive,*

*Ennobled oak tree.*

*Thus, would I wish to be...*

FATHER LIKE.

## A Budding Dominican

Very early, at the age of eleven, I entered La Escuela Apostolica of the Dominican Fathers in Valladolid (a minor seminary for the education of future priests). Far from home, without having any clear idea what it was like, or how I would fit into the new environment. Did I have a vocation? I was very devout, yes. At six years old I already expressed a desire to receive holy communion, but the parish priest did not want to accept me, *Such a small creature, he does not understand*, the priest said. I was really small. But because

of my persistence, he challenged me to memorize the catechism. I did, and for which he had to accept this insignificant creature.

Papa thought it was a good thing to send this child to the seminary. *There he will grow. The Dominicans are known to be good educators*, he said. Besides there were not so many choices in the rural areas of a country recovering from the devastation of a terrible civil war. I still remember the interview with the Father Provincial: *How many brothers and sisters are you?* he inquired. *Seven, Father*, I answered. *So, your father sent you here to get rid of you?* he asked. *No, Father*, I replied, and timidly added, *I want to be a Dominican.*

I have given interviews to applicants for the seminary, for the library, for the faculty of Medicine and Surgery of the University of Santo Tomas here in the Philippines. Did I too sound that cruel? To the reservations of my mother that I might not survive a boarding school, so far away from home, my father replied that he had been through it, and it was a good learning experience; his Capuchins were kinder than my Dominicans, though!

Upon his retirement, my father used to bring home stones collected from his excursions through the woods and fields. *Was there anything special about these stones?* we questioned ourselves. He saw forms. *Which*, we asked? We never *knew*. A mirror, I guess, in which he retrieved lost memories of long working days, weeding out stones under the sun and the rain in *El Soto*. My father never loved being a farmer. It was a harsh life from which he wanted to spare his children. The Dominican school was the best for his son, and his decision was final.

Just a few days after arriving in Arcas Reales, I received my first lesson. It had been raining and the football field was still wet. The ground was covered with gravel and small stones. About 200 boys roaming around trying to get to know one another and the surroundings. Difficult to find a friend. Somebody pointed out this boy to me. He was my own age and came from my own province, and with a very similar family background. (He is also a priest now). Immediately, we became friends. And like all children who grew up in a small village, we displayed our affection by throwing our arms around each other's neck. This is how cows and oxen were yoked together to labor in the fields when plowing or pulling a cart.

The inspector (I don't want to reveal his identity) spotted us and summoned us to explain why we were walking like that. *Don't you know*,

he said, *that it is prohibited to touch one another?* We did not understand what could be wrong with our innocent bonding and could not find any explanation. He took it as an offense and punished me then and there. *Kneel down until I call you up*, he said. As soon as he turned his back I started crying. One of the boys accompanying him looked back and made a rude sign to mock me. Automatically, I picked up a handful of little stones and threw them at him. I missed the target, but one little stone hit the inspector. He held me by the collar and spat out, *I am going to teach you a lesson, little worm*, and he hit me several times. That was the first lesson!

I religiously complied with all the requirements of home and school. Discipline was deeply embedded in the DNA of the Aparicios. It has marked my whole life. Besides, I believed I had a vocation for the priesthood. Never did I give a single thought to other possible alternatives. Five years under the tutelage of the Dominicans, molding us into little friars did accomplish at least one objective. We finished our preparatory courses successfully. Transition came naturally to the next stage, the Novitiate. Forty of us, all in our teens, entered the Dominican Novitiate of the Province of the Holy Rosary of the Philippines in Ocana, in 1965. This augured a promising future for the Dominican Missions in the Orient, the Philippines, Japan, Formosa, Hong Kong.

Ocana is a medium-sized town in the region called La Mancha, associated with Don Quijote de la Mancha and other figures of the Spanish Golden Age. We, too were little Don Quijotes, imagining windmills in faraway countries. This is the place where great men, professors of UST, martyrs of Vietnam, saints and sinners, missionaries, had received their training: Cardinal Zeferino Gonzalez, Blessed Buenaventura Garcia Paredes, Saints Ignacio Delgado and Jacinto Orfanel, etc. Our future would turn out to be more modest, though. Still, there we were in the prime of youth, full of expectations, ready for adventures.

One year elapsed fast quickly the routine of a strict monastic life. Father Vidal Fueyo, O.P., the Master of Novices, was an old venerable friar, trying to mold forty young men into zealous missionaries. Tonkin, Manila, China, Japan, started to become familiar in our conversations, as well as in our imaginary. The Dominican saints were the models to emulate: Saint Thomas Aquinas, Vincent Ferrer, Catherine of Siena, Fray Luis of Granada, Fr. Humberto de Romanis. But despite the worthy efforts of our formator, there were other forces: our bodies, our sexuality, our anxieties, our unresolved

questions that were taken for granted. Despite the high walls of the novitiate convent, forty young men could not escape the problems of a church and a society undergoing profound changes. The echoes of the Second Vatican Council resounded in the conversations, and the changes in Spanish society started to invade our sacred spaces.

*Fr. Angel, the Master of Novices was telling me, as we walked around the cloister, look up. What do you see?*

*I see the blue sky, I see white clouds, I see...*

*Good, my child. And what does this tell you?*

*Um... I hesitated, I don't know.*

*Listen. Do you hear something?*

*Yes, chirping of birds, noise of the water in the fountain...*

*Does this not tell you anything about God's marvelous creation?*

*O yes, Father, I assented without much conviction.*

Our group of forty remained intact until the time of our profession of vows one year later on the Feast of the Assumption of Mary into Heaven, August 15, 1965. This was our formal acceptance in the Dominican Order. But ours was a different sort of ascension. Our landing in the *coristado* (college seminary) was like a crash.

### **The Secret of a Vocation**

Unlike Santo Domingo of Ocana, the convent of San Pedro Martir in Madrid was an icon of openness: vast playing grounds, modern classrooms, and professors educated in Rome, Paris, Jerusalem, Louvain, the United States... even a radio station from which we aired programs of song and rhetoric. Well-known philosophers, poets, artist were invited to share their views with minds hungry for the new. There were no limits to our intellectual curiosity. Prayer and worship happened in a sanctuary flooded by light and color. Hearts and minds slowly turned outwards, with the collision between the old and the new. What had been so carefully cultivated by our mentors underwent a shaking. The solemn sounds of the organ were replaced by the guitar; the Gregorian chant, by modern song. We were children of the second Vatican Council and of a new society. Nobody could set limits to insatiable



hearts and minds. Slowly a worldly ferment was surreptitiously infiltrating the whole body. Demythologization or demolition set in the centenary construct of our religious life and practices. Eventually, corruption set in and dispersion started. The Dominican garden became desolate, like the garden of the *sastre*. In less than a decade most of our fellow seminarians abandoned the religious life. Out of the forty pious novices only seven remained. The miracle is that I survived the devastation. Was it grace? Yes, all is grace in our lives. However, one must examine how is grace appropriated.

Many a time my father chided me for not being present at the death of my grandfather Telesforo. He had prostate cancer. Despite the pain he refused to be operated on. I admired him, and could not stand looking at him in silence as he was undergoing agony, that strong man lying there, on his death bed. On the day of departure his horse, that used to bring him to El Soto broke the rod with which he was tied and escaped from the stable. I went out in search for him. When I returned, grandfather had died. I was seventeen years old.

It was at that age when *The Story of a Soul* fell into my hands. I don't know who had placed it inside the drawer of my grandfather's oak wood table. Every day, at siesta time, while the house remained silent, I would hide in my grandfather's office to read that fascinating story. The phenomenological French Philosopher, Marcel Merleau-Ponty used to affirm that *Eros is, for most people in our times, the only access to the marvelous*. "That is true," adds Jose Jimenez Lozano, one of my favorite writers. But I question, how? For whom? For how long? This story set my heart aflame. Before demons would awake within my spirit I fell for Thérèse of Lisieux, the author of that book.

Saint Teresita of the Child Jesus has become a rosy icon. But that she is not. Neither her early life before entering the monastery, nor her cloister years, was a path of roses or a dance of angels. Her cloister life was a way of the cross. She had already experienced a foretaste before being admitted to the Carmelite convent at the tender age of fifteen. Body and soul she walked through a path of thorns. I did not pay much attention to this, not yet. I was captivated by her pure soul.

Purification, though, is a long and painful process. It is not always self-evident. Only in hindsight can one discover the invisible threads that constitute the tissue of one's destiny. I could never understand why our Master, old Fr. Vidal Fueyo, O.P., in the short time of a year could have had such a profound impact in the life of his novice. There was this practice

in the novitiate routine: once a month we had the *Capitulo de Culpis* (Self confession or accusation of faults in the presence of the community.) One by one the novices would stand up, bow to the Master, and confess their faults: “*I accuse myself of sleeping during meditation,*” or “*talking in the corridors,*” etc. The Master would give the corresponding penance. We were learners of a high religious discipline. Sometimes, one had to scrutinize his conscience to find something of which to accuse himself; with a bit of mischief but utmost seriousness, someone would say to have broken a needle or lost his composure while at prayer. The Master, trying to disguise his amusement would gently correct the irreverent novice. In my memory still linger two instances during which I confessed publicly to a lack of humility. To bend my ego, the Master ordered me to kneel in front of each of my companions and kiss his feet, which I religiously did, even if some would hide them or kick me, though gently in the face.

One may dismiss this as a children’s game, or a masochist exercise, or an absurd experience, unrepeatable today. However, there is nothing in life that happens without meaning. How could I have taken so many humiliations in my life as a missionary if Fr. Fueyo had not given me that lesson? The missionary life is a noble vocation, but it does not spare you from bitter moments, instances that make of it a veritable march to Calvary. Jesus fell three times on his way to the cross. What right do we have to look with disdain upon practices sanctioned by tradition? This had been going on for centuries. Jesus did not send his disciples on a tourist mission. What is so extraordinary about bending your back and humbly kissing the feet of your fellow novices? Did not Jesus do it to his disciples, even to Judas?

All processes of the spirit entail a sharpening of our vision of ourselves and of the world around us; and a discarding of all that interferes between both. No matter how refined our own spiritual sensitivity is, still what may not be so refined, or what is false, or in bad taste, interferes in our vision. The teachings of the Master of Novices, the reading of *The Story of a Soul* by Therese of Lisieux, who also happened to be a Mistress of Carmelite Novices, did indeed make a first impact. An impact I myself was not aware of at the time, but which has always been present, in both the stormy and calm seasons of my life.

No wonder the Little Flower has been admitted to the illustrious roster of Doctors of the Church, which include the likes of Augustin, Aquinas, Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, etc. In the words of Saint John Paul II:

*Her ardent spiritual journey show so much maturity, and the insights of faith expressed in her writings are so vast and profound that they deserve a place among the great spiritual writers. Therese of Lisieux did not only grasp and describe the profound truth of Love as the center of the heart of the Church, but in her short life she lived it intensely. It is precisely this convergence of doctrine and concrete experience, of truth and life, of teaching and practice, which shines with particular brightness in this saint, and which makes her an attractive model especially for young people and for those who are seeking true meaning for their life.*

Only many years afterwards, with the help of the other Teresa, Teresa of Avila, did I start to understand the subtle influence of the Therese of Lisieux story in my own story: the search for true self, the longing for goodness and beauty, the exploration of beauty and goodness, joy and God; the searching for what cannot be held in one's hand, what remains invisible.

At twenty-four I was ordained priest by Mgr. Teodoro Labrador, Archbishop of Fuchou, in China. Thanksgiving Mass took place on July 15, 1973. It was a whole village celebration. Discourses, recitation of poems, Hosannas to the son of Alipio and Angeles. What an honor! Young boys raised a May tree. Under an arch of flowers, escorted by four local beauties we proceeded to the church adorned as for the big celebrations and filled to capacity. Surrounded by several priests *El Padre Angel* solemnly celebrated his first mass. Solemnity and pomp often hide the fragility of human life. Saint Paul writes that we carry a treasure in fragile earthen vessels. The problem is that we seldom realize it. That was a day of glory and exaltation: *Un hijo del pueblo* been received into the rank of the elect. A priest, a Dominican. A missionary. What an honor! And then?

## **Los Misioneros**

The other day my brother Fernando sent me picture of home and village, all covered by snow. The nearest to a polar panorama: on the foreground three pine trees stand as the lone sign of life in what otherwise looks like the Russian steppes. In the background, a chain of mountains dressed in immaculate white. Hanging from the sky, cotton-like clouds. Memories of childhood assail the mind, awakening those long days of winter

by the hearth sniffing the scent of wood: heather, resin, oak, ilex. The whole family gathered for the sacrifice of the pig, or the extraction of sweet honey. Chorizos, sausages, hocks, hams hanging from the ceiling. Mother knitting or mending a pair of socks.

*What are your plans for the future?* This was the question my youngest sister Maria Jesus asked the other day? *Don't you think of coming back home?* This was not the first time my siblings threw this question at me. *What shall I do in Spain?* has always been my answer. *This is what I do, what I have been doing for the last forty-one years, what I prepared for. There is nothing else I might be able to do.* And yet, at the back of my mind a question still lingers, *Was it worthwhile to leave it all behind for a long faraway country? Has UST acquired the dimension of the proverbial city seated on the top of the hill? Is it a passage to eternal life? Um!*

My hands are empty. *Nada*, writes John of the Cross, *at the top of Mount Carmel.* What from the distance appeared as attractive, as immaculate, as soft as the recently fallen snow over our mountains and hills, has become a barren desert? Snow is beautiful... for a day. The desert is enticing and dangerous. Grace has never been lacking, or a generous soul to guide you in moments of despair. Still, one has to cultivate his own garden. Water is hard to find to irrigate it. Gardens demand much attention, and effort, and determination. Beauty is that fragility, that lightning moment, that sparkle of light that lets you see where you are treading, but disappears as fast as it comes.

The reason Moses was allowed only a glance at the promise land from the heights of Mount Nebo seems to have been that at Meribah, when the people of Israel complained about lack of water, God commanded him to take the rod with which he had opened a passage through the Red Sea and struck the rock to produce water. Moses did so, but he doubted, and struck twice saying:

*Hear now, you, rebels; shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock? And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his rod twice; and water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their cattle. And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not believe me to sanctify me in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them."*

Fr. Lucio Gutierrez, O.P. (we called him *Lucin*) taught History of the Philippine Church for fifty years. As the current Dean of the Faculty of Theology of the University of Santo Tomas, he participated in the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines celebrated January 20 to February 17, 1991. Those of us who could not attend, he kept updated on the different commissions' proceedings, which he described with his proverbial flourish. One listened with delight to his anecdotes about former students, in attendance as Bishops, Priests, Vicars, Rectors, and lay faithful. One could not avoid but sympathize with Lucio when he narrated his final battle. He was outvoted in his proposal to delete the word "duress" from the Acts of the Council:

*The faith came to us, though not always without an element of duress. In an age which glorified the union of cross and sword. (Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines, Our Evangelization, Part I, n.10).*

*Duress*: threats? violence? compulsion? Is this how Fr. Lucio served in the country of his dreams, the land that he loved and walked from north to south, whose towns and cities he could recite one by one, the people low and great he interacted with, the children he treated with such affection? The apostle Saint Paul is represented with a sword in his hands. Did he preach the Gospels of Jesus Christ with duress? If this is how missionaries are represented, with duress, then I, too, am not a missionary.

"Meribah" means *quarrel, complaint, grudge*. Israel tempted God. To tempt God is, to force him to prove himself, to demand something as if one had the right to do it, to challenge God or deal with him as if he were a simple human being. In biblical religion this is called magic, a provocation of the divine. In one word, to tempt God is to doubt God, to harden one's heart. Pressed by the thirsty people, at Meriba, Moses struck twice, that is, he doubted. Had he forgotten all God's blessings? Did he need an additional proof of God's benevolence? God is the fountain of refreshing waters. John of the Cross kept his faith despite the dark night of his soul, for he says:

<i>Que bien se yo la fonte</i>	<i>Well I know the fountain</i>
<i>Que mana y corre,</i>	<i>that runs and flows,</i>
<i>Aunque es de noche.</i>	<i>Though it is night.</i>

His fellow Carmelites had even prohibited him from celebrating the Holy Eucharist. He was deprived of what constituted the essence of his life, his priesthood. He laid his offerings on an imaginary altar.

*Aunque es de noche.*

To have faith is to walk in darkness with absolute trust in God.

Our seniors in the seminary scornfully called us *Los Misioneros*. And this is what we wanted to be, missionaries: Fernando Muñoz was sent to Taiwan; Antonio Gonzalez, to the Batanes Islands; Eugenio del Prado and Andres Galparsoro, to Japan; Angel Aparicio, Javier Gonzalez, and Francisco Rodilla, to the University of Santo Tomas. Antonio Cabrejas to Ecuador. Only Rafael Laya, who did not have good health, remained in Spain.

It was forty-one years ago that I landed in Manila with on a mission. Some years back, when my sister Esther visited me, she asked me if I was indeed a missionary? I replied, not in the traditional sense, converting and baptizing pagans. And yet, I am a missionary. The intellectual formation of missionaries in the province of the Holy Rosary was impressive—so we believed. However, we faced face so many surprises. Besides, in a century of ecumenism, interfaith dialogue, multiculturalism, does the word mission still have meaning? Is the twenty-first century a century of missions?

Saint Therese of the Child Jesus never left the cloister of her monastery in Lisieux, and yet she has been declared the patron saint of the missions, together with the great missionary Francis Xavier, who travelled through the countries of the Orient, converting and baptizing pagans to the Christian faith. Things have changed, and so has the concept of mission.

The first three years in the mission became a challenge to my religious life. Even my priesthood was at stake. UST at the time was similar to the well of the *noria* in the Garden of my grandfather. There were all kinds of reptiles, big and small, in the form of intrigues, suspicions, contempt, conflicts of interests between brothers. I acquired an allergy to the word *puti*. White is the Dominican habit, white is the *Kastila*, white is the oppressor, white... Just hearing the word *puti* would provoke a revulsion in my guts. The rest may not have been as dramatic, but adjustments needed to be done all along the way. This was a completely different world, for which I was prepared neither emotionally nor spiritually.

Saint Teresita of the Child Jesus recounts an episode early in her life. She was six years old. This was a picnic day. Imagine the child's excitement at preparing, cooking, wrapping sandwiches, packing, dressing up, etc. When the whole family sat down for *merienda*, she was disappointed when she realized that the marmalade spread on her bread had changed its fresh appearance into a fading rose color. Adults did not even notice it. But for this sensitive child, it became an image of her life. She would offer her freshness, her beauty, her vitality to the Lord.

Saint Therese of the Child Jesus has been an inspiration. Her story has played an important role in my own journey. In a letter to a seminarian, she wrote: *If I had a brother, I would pray that he become a priest. If I had two brothers, I will pray that the second become a missionary.*

I have trusted in her prayers from heaven.

### **About Braying and Whispering?**

The only thing I can boast about is having survived forty-one years in the University of Santo Tomas in the Philippines. Is it fidelity? Some will call this stubbornness. In Spanish we say, "More stubborn than a donkey."

I still remember the warning of my superior soon after my arrival in UST. *Fr. Angel, you will receive more blows than the donkey of Balaam.* Fr. Quintin Maria Garcia, O.P., a missionary expelled from China, my first superior in the Community of Santo Tomas was a clairvoyant.

Little boys in little towns, during autumn, at the end of the harvest enjoyed free time the whole afternoon, except for having to bring the domestic animals to the pasture grounds. This task did not demand much effort: to be around and keep the animals within the boundaries. I was about eight years old. I was entrusted with the care of two cows, one horse, and one donkey. They were peacefully grazing, while the children were playing. Suddenly, without warning, the donkey brayed loudly. To stop him from starting a stampede, I tightly grabbed him by the rope that tied him down. He dragged me for a few meters. He proved stronger than I was. With an uprooted nail in one of my fingers, I let him go. I was hurting from the wound and the older boys were poking fun at me while cheering on the passionate donkey.

Donkeys are part of the imaginary of those who have grown in rural areas of the Mediterranean countries, such as Spain in the West and the

Holy Land in the Middle East. The donkey is a symbol of meekness, but also of stupidity and stubbornness. If the teacher called you *burro* you were doomed. If your elders said that you had long ears, everyone understood the implications.

This is unfair, though. Donkeys are lovely animals. One of my favorite books since childhood is the famous *Platero y Yo*, by Nobel prize laureate Juan Ramon Jimenez. The Bible mentions donkeys in many passages. Saul was looking after his father's donkeys when Samuel anointed him as king of Israel. Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey.

Chapters 21-22 of the Book of Numbers tell the story of Balaam. Balak, the Moabite king, finds the Israelites massed on his border. The Israelites are described as a numerous force, feeding on the land, and denuding it. Moab was in dread of them, and in desperation the king engaged the seer Balaam known for his magic powers. Listen to his story: (for convenience I referred to the donkey with the name Gelitin).

*God came to Balaam during the night and said to him; If, indeed, these men have come to invite you, go along with them. But only the oracle that I communicate to you, such may you perform.*

*So, Balaam arose on the morrow, saddled Gelitin, and accompanied the Moabite chieftains.*

*God became enraged that he was undertaking the journey. The angel of YHWH stationed himself on the road, confronting him as an adversary while he rode along on Gelitin, and accompanied by his two squires.*

*When Gelitin saw the angel of YHWH stationed on the road, with his sword unsheathed in his hand, she swerved from the road and went into the field. Balaam struck Gelitin to bring her back to the road.*

*The angel of YHWH then halted in the narrow path of the vineyards, fenced in on both sides.*

*Upon seeing the angel of YHWH, Gelitin pressed herself against the fence, squeezing Balaam's leg against the fence. He continued to strike her.*



*The angel of YHWH continued to move on and halted in a narrow space with no room to move aside either to the right or to the left.*

*When Gelitin saw the angel of YHWH she crouched down under Balaam. Thereupon, Balaam became enraged and struck Gelitin with the rod.*

*YHWH opened Gelitin's mouth, so that she spoke to Balaam: "What have I done to you, that you should strike me these three times?"*

*Hereupon, Balaam said to Gelitin: "Because you have tormented me. Would that I held a sword in my hand, for I would promptly slay you!"*

*But Gelitin said to Balaam: "Am I not your very own Gelitin, whom you have ridden from your first day until now? Have I ever before sought to gain an advantage by behaving toward you in such a manner?" He replied: "No."*

Balaam had a mission: pronouncing execrations against the Israelites. Balak hoped to weaken the Israelites in this way, so that he would have a chance of defeating them in battle. Balaam accepted the mission, but instead of cursing the enemies of Balak, Balaam pronounced a series of blessings, ending with these words: *I see it, but not now; I envision it, but not soon. A star marches forth from Jacob; a meteor rises from Israel.* (Some interpreters say this meteor is the star followed by the Magi who were in search of the newly-born king of the Jews, Jesus).

This, like many other stories of the Bible is polysemic. The tale of the she-donkey of Balaam would appear to have been written for the primary purpose of mocking Balaam's capabilities. For all his reputed clairvoyance, Balaam is disparagingly depicted as one who could not foresee the angel of God standing in his path, even though his donkey could!

*What a surprise we will have at the end of the world when we read the story of souls!... How astounded people will be when they see the way by which mine has been led! (Saint Therese of Lisieux, *History of a Soul*).*

God continuously sends his angels to warn his faithful, to guide them, to make a detour on our way, to keep us from committing a crime, to warn us about imminent dangers. Oftentimes, we keep urging the dumb donkey on, hitting her, like Balaam. We need her eyes, the eyes of a donkey to see the angel in our life pilgrimage.

Unforgettable experience, unforgettable story. How prescient were the words of Fr. Magin Borrajo, *why are you going to the Philippines?* Well, here am I! God has his own designs and he never fails to send his messengers—his angels—to guide us. Most of the time, they talk to us in whispers. But should we not listen, they may bray loudly, like the donkey of Balaam.

### **Epilogue:**

When I began this narrative, I was in a sad mood. It is not the wish of the narrator to project sadness, or bitterness. But truth needs to be said. And this is a true story.

Postscript: *We have no right to deny the limits which we have to transcend... As long as we have not violated a commandment or a rule, as long as we have not transgressed. How are we to do this? By doing more that it obliges us to do... we are still within the limited area which the commandment or the rule represents...*

(S. Fumet, *L'Impatient des limites. Petit Traite du Firmament*, Lyons, 1942, pp 29-30).

Let me close on a note of joy? In the words of Psalm 126: 5-6,

*Those who sow in tears  
Will reap with songs of joy.  
He who goes out weeping,  
Carrying seed to sow,  
Will return with songs of joy,  
Carrying sheave with him. (Ps 126: 5-6)*

(Saint Thomas Aquinas Priory Manila, December 28, 2020. Feast of the Innocents. In tribute to my father, Alipio Aparicio, on the third anniversary of his death.)