

Eulogy: A Tribute to My Mother - MabuhayRadio

Written by The Rev. Dr. Winfred B. Vergara

Saturday, 31 January 2009 03:48 - Last Updated Saturday, 31 January 2009 04:14

(Delivered by The Rev. Dr. Winfred B. Vergara, at the Memorial Service held at the St. Michael & All Angels Episcopal Church, Seaford, NY 12/7/08)

My mother, Clarita Bagao Vergara, was born on September 11, 1922, in Pili, Ajuy, Iloilo, Philippines, and died last November 13, 2008, in her birthplace. She was named after a saint. "Clarita" means "little Clara" and must refer to St. Claire of Assisi, the female counterpart of St. Francis, the patron saint of peace-loving people. Many of you have not seen my mother, but if you have known me, you would have known my mother also. It is because all my good traits, I learned from my mother. The not-so-good ones, I submit, I learned them from somewhere else. So what have I learned from my mother?

Filial Piety

The first trait I learned from my mother is filial piety, the traditional Asian respect given to the elderly. The word mother in Philippines is "Nanay," and my mother had the custom of calling elderly women as "Nanay" and elderly men as "Tatay." The fifth of the Ten Commandments is "*honor thy father and thy mother*" and this is the commandment with a promise---"*that you may live long on the earth*

."(Exodus 20:12). My mother was the eldest and only girl in the family of six children and she was the one who lived the longest. I believe her long life was the fruit of that biblical promise. In life, she was the one who really cared for my grandmother when the latter was very old, blind and had Alzheimer's. Aside from living longer than her siblings, my mother was also blessed with 7 children, 22 grandchildren and 21 great-grandchildren---and counting.

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Education

The second value I learned from my mother is the importance of education. Education is one of the equalizers in Philippine society and parents would sacrifice to great length to send their children to school. For our family, that was very hard. We were seven children. My father was a wounded veteran of the Second World War but did not receive any pension. It was because just after the War with Japan in 1940-1944, he was conscripted to proceed to the Korean War but my mother insisted that he did not go. My father resigned from the military and worked as a tailor but his income was not enough to send us all to school. So when I reached high school, I stowed away in a ship bound for Manila, became a street kid and finally worked as a janitor in exchange for school.

What motivated me to risk leaving my village and struggled against all odds to obtain education? This is the story: At age 7, my mother enrolled me to Grade 1 at the barrio elementary school. At that time in 1957, there was a nutrition feeding program for the children of indigent families and I was one of those who belong to the category. So at lunchtime, we would line up with our glass bowl to receive nutritious corn pudding and milk. Unfortunately, when the pudding was placed on my bowl, it was too hot that my bowl fell and broke into pieces. I went home crying because that was our only glass bowl. So my mother made me a bowl made of coconut shell! I went back to school but my classmates made fun of me. In our school, a glass bowl or ceramic bowl was like a badge of social status; a bowl from coconut shell was to be the poorest of the poor. So from that time, I hated school but my Mom would patiently talk me to it. And when I became stubborn, she would spank and practically push me to school with this---a broom made from coconut sticks! Then she gave me an advice which I will never forget: "My son, you can be more than you can be, if you study and get education. But if you don't, my broom will haunt you forever!"

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Today, I finished high school, obtained a college degree, two masters' degrees and two doctorate degrees---all because of my Mother's broom!

Survival and entrepreneurship

The third value I learned from my *Nanay*, is plain survival. In our barrio, there were only five wealthy families. They were the owners of the farm lands. The rest were farming tenants, fisher folks or poor families. There were three seasons: planting, harvest, and festival seasons. The agricultural months were divided into these: June-July-August were planting months; November-December-January were harvesting months; February-March-April were festival months, where the harvested rice are often consumed. Did I miss three months? Yes, they were August-September-October. They were the lean months. Most of the rice in the granaries was running low and we would experience hunger. What did my mother do?

First, to economize, she would cook rice mixed with cassava or sweet potatoes. Second, we would walk miles to go to town and line up for the government's emergency rice program. Third, she went into cassava-cake business. At night, she would cook cassava cakes; early in the morning, she would go to the fishermen's wharf and barter the cakes with fish; before noon, we would go up to the farms and barter the fish with rice. So as a child, I would carry for my Mom a large basket of cassava cakes to the beach; two pails of fish to the farms; and a sack of rice back to our barrio. That must be the reason why I did not grow up taller! I had burdens beyond my age.

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Love

Finally, the fourth value that my mother taught me was love, sacrificial love. I remember a story which my mother told me. It was about a mother and her son. She was a loving mother but he was a stupid son. He fell in love with a woman on the other side of the mountain who told him, "I would accept your offer of love if you can give me the heart of your mother." Maybe it was just a figure of speech or maybe the woman was really wicked. The boy however thought about it and in a moment of stupidity, took a knife, stabbed his mother and took her heart out. He then ran towards the mountain to offer the heart to his object of affection but he stumbled on the paddies and the heart fell in the mud. He scooped the heart and as he was wiping it, the heart spoke: "Son, are you hurt?"

That story was like a horror movie to me then but when I became a priest, it dawned upon me that it powerfully illustrates God's love. God also forgave our stupidity in that "*while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us*

" (Romans 5:8). Christ's suffering and death (like that of the mother's) was substitutionary. The prophet Isaiah aptly said, "

He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, he was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities, upon him was the chastisements that made us whole and by his stripes we are healed

" (Isaiah 53).

I remember how my mother suffered every time one of us children got sick. Once I was very ill with dysentery, I overheard her praying, "*God, let the sickness be upon me, for I can't bear to see my son die* ." Thank God, that prayer was not answered but it motivated me much to take bitter medicine and cooperated with my healing.

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Maybe that is why three of her sons: Pepito, Alberto and I have become priests. Mother not only taught us faith and hope but also sacrificial love.

I honor my Mother

So today in the presence of you, my friends, I honor my mother. I have no doubt that her soul is now with our loving God, in that place “*where there is no more pain, no more suffering, no more mourning---but only life everlasting* .” She has returned to her eternal home and together with Christ (and all other mothers), she will help prepare a mansion for me and all other sons and daughters. Amen. # # #

Editor's Notes: The Rev. Dr. Winfred Vergara is the Director of Ethnic Congregational Development and National Missioner for Asiamerica Ministries of The Episcopal Church in New York City; he also serves as Supply Clergy for St. Michael and All Angels Episcopal Church, in Seaford, (Long Island), New York and priest at Holy Child-St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Woodside (Queens), New York.

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