

Phillip Pestaño Memorial - MabuhayRadio

Written by Rev. Fr. James B. Reuter, S.J.

Saturday, 17 January 2009 04:27 - Last Updated Monday, 19 January 2009 10:09

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Justice at 3 A.M.

By Rev. Fr. James B. Reuter, S.J.

Phillip Andrew A. Pestaño graduated from the Ateneo de Manila High School in 1989, entered the Philippine Military Academy, and became an Ensign in the Philippine Navy in 1993. He was assigned as cargo master, on a Navy ship.

He discovered that the cargo being loaded onto his vessel included logs that were cut down illegally, were carried to the ship illegally, and were destined to be sold, illegally. Then there were 50 sacks of flour, which were not flour, but shabu – worth billions. Literally, billions. And there were military weapons which were destined for sale to the Abu Sayyaf.

He felt that he could not approve this cargo.

Superior officers came to him and said: "Please! Be reasonable! This is big business. It involves many important people. Approve this cargo." But Phillip could not, in conscience, sign approval.

Then his parents received two phone calls, saying: "Get your son off that ship! He is going to be killed!" When Phillip was given leave at home, his family begged him not to go back. Their efforts at persuasion continued until his last night at home, when Phillip was already in bed.

His father came to him and said: "Please, son, resign your commission. Give up your military career. Don't go back. We want you alive. If you go back to that ship, it will be the end of you!" But Phillip said to his father: "Kawawa ang bayan!" And he went back to the ship.

The scheduled trip was very brief – from Cavite to Roxas Boulevard – it usually took only 45 minutes. But on September 27, 1995, it took one hour and a half. When the ship arrived at Roxas Boulevard, Ensign Pestaño was dead.

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The body was in his stateroom, with a pistol, and a letter saying that he was committing suicide. The family realized at once that the letter was forged. They tried desperately for justice, carrying the case right up to the Senate.

The Senatorial Investigation Committee examined all the evidence, carefully. Then they issued an official statement, saying among other things: Ensign Phillip Pestaño did not commit suicide. He was murdered. He was shot through the head, somewhere outside of his stateroom, and the body was carried to his room and placed in the bed. The crime was committed by more than one person. In spite of these findings, by the Senate, the family could not get justice. The case is still recorded, by the Navy, as suicide. For 12 years they have been knocking at the doors of those in power, to no avail. Now they realize that they should knock on the door of Him who said: "Knock, and it shall be opened to you. Ask and you shall receive. Seek, and you shall find."

So they are asking all of the friends of Phillip from the Ateneo, from the PMA, friends of the family – including the girl he was engaged to marry – to say this prayer: Lord, we know that Phillip is safe with you, and will be safe forever, because he gave up his life, as You gave up Your life - for justice. If it is Your will, please let the truth be known of his heroic courage and strength and love of country. Let justice be rendered here on earth. But if it is not Your will that justice be rendered here, give each of us the grace to live and die as he did - following in Your footsteps.

And at the last judgment, Lord, when all that is hidden will be known, let Phillip be seen as he really is – "a brave young man who gave his life for honesty, truth, and justice."

* * *

Epilogue: Phillip Pestaño died at the age of 24. He was scheduled to be married in January of 1996, four months after he was murdered.

He was a martyr. A martyr is one who dies for the faith or for a Christian virtue. Phillip died for a Christian virtue – justice. It is not likely that he will ever be canonized, but he takes his place among the Unknown Saints.

Some military men are killed in battle. They are given a hero's burial. But Phillip died for a much deeper cause – he was trying to preserve the integrity of our Armed Forces. He died out of loyalty to the Philippines, in an effort to keep the oath that he made when he graduated from the Military Academy.

Graft and corruption are the curse of this nation. But when they take root in the heart of our Armed Forces, they threaten our existence as an independent, democratic country.

The family of Phillip Pestaño is doing the right thing. They are turning to God. They are praying that justice will be administered here, in our country, in our day. But if this is not God's will, then let us at least try to preserve the ideal of integrity in every mind and heart and soul. # # #

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Editor's Note: Prof. Cesar Torres of San Francisco, California, sent in this article.

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