

## Prayer and dialogue in the Philippines

# The Rizal Movement

**Isagani Casambros - Len Leyva - Gay Maddela**

*Three members of the Rizal Ecumenical Movement (REM) belonging to different churches offer a series of snapshots into their shared experience and, consequently, that of going out towards others. They speak of an ecumenism of the people born naturally among them as a life practice. REM was founded in 2016 from a desire for dialogue, prayer and action. It is composed of people from ten different Christian Churches, all represented in the National Council of Churches of the Philippines.*

*Isagani Casambros, pastor of the Southern Tagalog Conference of the United Church of Christ:*

We continually encounter many challenges, negative perceptions and prejudices on this journey, due to ignorance and the fear of proselytism and conversions. As the fraternal relationship between us has grown, we understand that what matters is only to love. Now there is more openness among everyone and a deep respect for each person and his or her faith. We have come to appreciate the gift that each one brings to the community. Our gatherings have become family gatherings, and our diversity has paved the way for harmony, instead of creating disunity.

*Len Leyva:* I am a Catholic catechist, and I did not want to participate in ecumenical activities. Once, during an ecumenical celebration, I was asked to contribute a donation of rice for their lunch, and a couple who wanted to share some freshly caught lake fish came to the meeting, too. I had planned to leave immediately after bringing the rice, but seeing the love among those present, my prejudices vanished and I decided to stay. And I have been working for ecumenism ever since.

*Gay Maddela:* I am an Episcopalian. Working for this dialogue means establishing personal relationships, accepting others, listening, accompanying one another, and truly being like part of a family.

A priest from another Church, for example, was having a very difficult time. He was persecuted and suspended from ministry for a year. Feeling dejected, he found the courage to share his suffering with us. We listened to and accompanied him with our prayers and unity. Later he confided to us how much strength he drew from our love.

## With God and together

*Isagani Casambros:* In 2019, the Rizal Movement held an ecumenical retreat involving 15 pastors and collaborators from five different Churches. It was for us an experience of God and of mutual love that builds bridges by binding us into one family. Moved by the spirit

of communion, everyone generously shared what they live and experience. Providence covered all the expenses and I personally received a special grace. During that retreat time it became clear to me that God was calling me to give myself totally to him. So, I went back to the seminary to become a pastor.

In 2021, the Philippine Catholic Bishops' Conference and the National Council of Churches entrusted the Rizal Movement with the opening celebration of *the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity*. We had little time to prepare, but we tried to put love into everything. Despite the various challenges, we could involve seminarians and youth from various groups and dioceses. It was an extraordinary experience of mutual love among us, and we experienced God at work in a powerful way. The liturgical celebration was simple, solemn and beautiful. It also coincided with the 500th anniversary of Christianity in the Philippines, a celebration of major significance. Although, it was an online event due to the pandemic at the time, it had a strong impact on everyone, due to the tangible presence of God.

### **Attention to others and concrete love**

*Gay Maddela:* We have also tried to help in addressing social issues impacting our people. We visited a small community of 27 families, whose homes had been swept away by the typhoon. We brought some basic necessities and cooked for them. They were touched by our love, even to the point of preparing a bamboo walkway for our return afterwards, so that we would not need to wade through the river as we left.

Once, due to some communication problems, our guide, instead of accompanying us to the usual indigenous tribe that we visit, took us to another very poor community. We decided that we would give them all that we had brought, and there was much joy.

Then, on the subsequent visit to the indigenous Dumagat tribe that had been our original destination, abundant providence came to our aid in goods, money and volunteers willing to help. We were able to distribute three hundred food parcels to three communities. Truly, no one can surpass God in generosity.

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<sup>1</sup> Traditional Filipino boat.