



## COMPANIONS ON THE JOURNEY

By Bro. Jess Balan

*“The Incarnation, an expression of God’s divine love, dwells in sinful and weak humanity. The complexity and sanctity of my life consist in the union of the divine grace and my vulnerable humanity. The complexities of the priest’s life are fraught, though not exclusive, with doubts, despair, sadness, abandonment and loneliness. In spite of what I am, weak and sinful, God continues to walk with me, strengthening and patiently purifying me little by little and hewing out what is pleasing to him until my Last Hurrah.”*  
*(Excerpts from “The Complex Sanctity of My Priestly Life” by Msgr. Fernando Gutierrez, published in the Asian Journal, San Diego, Oct. 15, 2016)*

Through-out our lives, until we come face to face with our Creator, we meet and encounter several people...on and off, somehow, they became our **companions on the journey**. One person, a very extraordinary Catholic priest, as I came to know, was Msgr. Fernando Gutierrez.

I did not know him that much from the start. Until he invited me to come with him on a Sunday Mass in the Metropolitan Correctional Center (Federal Prison) in downtown San Diego, where he worked as a Chaplain. I began to learn many things about him...and the rest, as they say, is history.

That first encounter in December of 2001 (about three months after 9/11), turned into an every-Sunday (sometimes Saturday) affair, that lasted for over ten (10) years...

At first, he asked me to assist him in the Masses for the inmates, by singing and playing my guitar. The facility has eleven (11) floors. The 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> floors are for admin and dining of inmates. The rest of the floors are the cells or living quarters and the penthouse on top of the building is for their recreation. In every floor of living quarters, there is a center space where we hold the Masses.

They have a small Chapel on the second floor. However, it was too small for all Catholics in the facility. So, we do the Mass in every floor that have the most Catholic inmates. But we can only do three (3) Masses every Sunday at best, that is why Msgr. Fernando Gutierrez also give one (1) or two (2) Masses on Saturdays... Sometimes he rotates the inmates in different floors to bring them to the Chapel on Sundays. But this process took too much time and too complicated, because Mons, (as we fondly addressed him) has to make sure the right inmates can come together. They cannot mix inmates who belonged in different gangs otherwise, there will be trouble or fights! Through the years these became a routine for him in the facility, and little did he know, maybe these were taking a toll in his health...

The facility used to have two (2) or three (3) chaplains for different religions. However, there came a time and for a long time when, Mons was left by himself to do the entire religious and other related services to every types of inmates. And there were no other paid employees to help him. So, he proposed something to me, that of course, I cannot refuse: For us to split, in order to cover more floors to service the inmates.

To split ourselves meant for me to cover a few floors by myself (doing Communion Service) and him to handle other floor(s)...this way we accomplish our mission...for the inmates to receive the Eucharist...at least try to do the best we can!

It was this time when he told me something very profound, that is why I said I cannot refuse. That of all the things I do in life, especially in this facility, ***“Giving the Eucharist to the inmates is one of the best services you can do for the people of God”***. It doesn't mean that my singing and playing the guitar don't count for much, but God has placed us in certain appropriate places in time for His purpose, he implied. Then I thought, how else these inmates could ever receive our Lord, Jesus in the Eucharist...if not through us? I could never deny them the Most Blessed Sacrament...

In 2008, as we can remember, the Real Estate market suffered a meltdown. Every one of us who owned, buying their homes or some kind of investment in the Real Estate in recent years have lost their invested money. And Mons was one of them. Forced to short sell the condo where he was living and foreclosed the other that he planned to sell upon retiring.

By June of the same year, he underwent a CABG (Coronary Artery Bypass Grafting). One cannot tell for sure, or even his doctor(s), if the diagnosis and the decision to perform this CABG was the result of too much stress from the Real Estate meltdown or from his work in the Federal prison...or both?

But then, on February of the following year (2009), he told me why his legs were wobbly and his fingers stiff. He said after giving a conference to the prison staff, as he was walking out of the hall, he accidentally fell, and then later on was told he suffered from subdural hematoma. And if these weren't enough, that same year, Mons was diagnosed with MM (Multiple Myeloma), a cancer of plasma cells.

By this time, I began to have the feeling that Mons was getting depressed, as he started walking with a cane, then later on with a walker. However, I don't think he ever showed it to anybody,

but me. I knew it because in most of all those countless trips to the doctors and hospitals, I was the one who he called for the ride, since he could not drive anymore. Just like what Bro. Rudy would always say, ***“I am the Uber!”***

In August of 2009, the MCC San Diego, Dept. of Justice, Bureau of Prisons, awarded Mons a medical disability retirement.

Between 2009 and 2016, Mons spent his retirement here in San Diego recovering from his health issues. Then he offered to give services and presided Masses in the Paradise Village Senior Center, National City. There were three (3) alternate priest, and I served as sacristan/altar server for them. Bro. Rey Paco became my alternate as sacristan, until he finally moved and retired in the Philippines.

Mons continued to preside Masses and give talks to the Cursillo Movement and the El Shaddai groups in San Diego. He continued to write books and became a weekly columnist for the Asian Journal San Diego and also a weekly radio talk host in ***“Thulog ang Lambat”*** for Radyo Filipino America, in National City.

In October 7, 2016, Mons celebrated his 50<sup>th</sup> Sacerdotal Anniversary at St. Charles Catholic Church of San Diego. About a month later, in November 3<sup>rd</sup> 2016, Mons finally and permanently moved to the Philippines, in his home town of Hagonoy, Bulacan.

Through the years, from the time he started his ministry in the Federal Prison, up to his 50<sup>th</sup> Sacerdotal Anniversary, Mons became my companion in ministry...or should I say, I became Mons' companion in his ministry. My consolations were treats for lunch at his favorite restaurants, mostly in Japanese or Korean restaurants.

But more than these, what I treasured the most were the wisdom from the talks that we had. And the lessons I learned from his ministry. Most people have known him from his famous talks and jokes he performed on those conferences and Masses that he presided. But behind and beyond all those great performances...and the successes in all of his books...were many challenges, tragedies, pain and sufferings. Many ***“Dark Nights of the Soul”***, as he described it from the book of St. John of the Cross.

One of the books that he wrote was, ***“Tears in a Bottle”***. In this book, he described how several famous characters in the Bible suffered from tragedies, but recovered and succeeded at the end. The making of this book however, was inspired from and by the experiences from his own life.

Together, Mons and I wrote a song entitled, ***“Gaganda Pang Lagi Ang Bukas”***. It reflected his feelings of doubts, strong faith and hope for the future... I wish someday I could sing it for all of you...that's if ... I can still sing and play my guitar!

And so, one can see how Mons and I became “*Companions on the Journey*”. Just like in the song we hear being sung in our church, “...*breaking bread and sharing life; and in the love we bear is the hope we share, for we believe in the love of our God, we believe in the love of our God.*” De Colores!

**“GAGANDA PANG LAGI ANG BUKAS”**

**(1)**

*LIKAS SA TAO, ANG MAG-DAM-DAM, MAGPAHAYAG NG ALIN-LANGAN.  
SA KABUTIHAN NG MAY-KAPAL! KALIKASANG KUPAS-KULAY...  
ANG LAHAT NG MABUTING GAWA, ‘DI BAGA INA-ALINTANA,  
HANDOG SA BUHAY NA BIYAYA, ‘DI MAHALAGA, AT BALE WALA!*

**(KORO)**

*GAGANDA PANG LAGI ANG BUKAS, (MANALIG!)  
ANG PAG-ASA’Y DARATING, (HINTAYIN!)  
DIYOS AY LAGING BUKAS-PALAD, KABUTIHA’Y, ‘DI MAPAPAG-TING!*

**(2)**

*SA WALA IKAW AY NILIKHA, KAPATID LAGI MONG ISIPIN.  
ANG DIYOS ‘DI MAGPAPABAYA, MAKALIMOT MAN ANG INAHIN!  
SA PAGKANDILI AT ARUGA, SA SISIW SA KANYANG PILING,  
ANG MAYKAPAL AY LAGING HANDA, SAKLOLOHAN KA’T KALINGA-IN.*

**(KORO 2)**

*MANALIG SA MAYKAPAL, (MAGDASAL), ‘YONG PAKA LILIMI-IN, (SUSUNDIN!)  
GAGANDA PANG LAGI ANG BUKAS, MANALIG,  
ANG PAG-ASA’Y DARATING!*