

Swimming in the wider culture

THE STRUGGLE TO PRESERVE THE CULTURE AND ECOLOGICAL WISDOM OF TRIBAL FILIPINOS... AN INTERVIEW WITH BISHOP FRANCISCO CLAVER

By Fiona Connelly

In 1980, Bishop Francisco Claver welcomed Scarboro missionaries to his diocese of Malaybalay in the Southern Philippines. An outspoken critic of martial law imposed by the Marcos dictatorship in those days, he has championed the rights of the poor, the Church's role in promoting social justice, basic Christian communities, and nonviolence as the way to bring about true and lasting social and political change.

An architectural wonder of the world exists high in the Cordillera mountain range of the northern Philippines. Rising as "stairways to heaven" and spanning 20,000 hectares (49,400 acres), the rice terraces of Luzon are a living testament to the engineering and creative genius of the indigenous inhabitants of the area. Using hand tools, simple building materials like stones, sand and clay, and elaborate forms of irrigation, these still-functioning rice paddies were painstakingly carved out of harsh terrain by Ifugao tribespeople.

"No one knows how old the terraces are," says Bishop Francisco Claver, an anthropologist. "Some say 4,000 years, but no tests like carbon dating have ever been done to verify this."

The rice terraces now attract awestruck tourists to the area, but this superficial popularity misses the deep meaning the terraces have for the indigenous peoples who built them. "If you destroy the terraces, you will destroy their culture," says Bishop



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Claver, the first person of indigenous background to be named a bishop in the Philippines.

For centuries these vertical gardens have provided the Ifugao with their main livelihood. In turn, aware of how their food relies on clean water, they have fiercely protected both the terraces and the watershed that feeds their irrigation systems. "Water is their whole life," Bishop Claver reflects. "They are scientists; they know the connection between conserving the forests and preserving water. They have had this ecological concern from the beginning."

The indigenous communities have successfully resisted the incursions of mining companies

interested in the rick deposits of copper and gold. In neighbouring provinces, these same companies have polluted local waterways with the poisonous byproducts of the mining process.

Today the fight to preserve the terraces faces a new threat. "The people are fighting now to save their forests from being turned into farms, because once the forests go, so does the water," says the Bishop. In addition, the chemical fertilizers used on such farms will pollute local water. "Then when the local farmer takes his *carabao* (water buffalo)



Bishop Francisco Claver.

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to drink at the stream, it falls ill."

The economics of the terraces also weigh against their survival. Whereas two crops can be harvested from lowland rice fields each year, only one crop can be taken from the terraces annually.

Now less essential for the provision of food, the rice terraces are still crucial for the preservation of culture. Bishop Claver says, "The sons and daughters of the people have been educated as doctors, teachers and nurses; not to work in the fields. They have lost a sense of the ecological balance that is needed." Sadly, without the involvement of a new generation, the terraces are beginning to deteriorate.

"How do you solve this problem?" Bishop Claver asks. "With development as the world defines it, we educate people out of their culture. It is sad to think that the only way to preserve the terraces is to keep the people poor."

"Our success depends on the people of the diocese," he says. "And we are beginning to see a wider ecological consciousness. We are in our poverty, but we still have our environment. Through the Catholic schools there are some things we can preserve so the culture is not completely destroyed—so that we may swim in the wider culture but not lose the identity of our tribal culture."∞

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Midday thirst

A reflection on John 4:1-42

By André Myre

It is midday. Not the best time to fetch water. Even with the jug covering her head, the sun is wicked. There is one advantage; this won't take long as there should be no one at the well. But there is someone. A man. She moves forward. It is a stranger. She fills her jug. Before she has taken a step he speaks to her, asking for a drink. She freezes. No matter who he is, he must realize that he cannot speak to someone he doesn't know. What will people say if they see this?

She approaches him with the jug. He drinks. Looking at her, he asks if she is thirsty. An odd question since he sees that her jug is full. No, he wants to talk to her of life, of her thirst for happiness.

She trembles. No one has ever asked her if she is happy. No one has ever asked her about this thirst that devours her, this emptiness that makes her dizzy, this yearning to possess that pushes her towards and away from everyone. No one has ever talked to her about these things. No one except this stranger, this Jew, who asks her what she thirsts for in life. She is stunned. Who does he think he is? Her husband? She has no husband. They all abandoned her once she was of no more use to them. He tells her he knows this. He is a prophet! What must he think of her?

Quick, change the subject. Talk about religion: "Where is the best place to meet God, on your mountain or mine?" He smiles. Did she just say something silly?

It is at the heart of such thirst that we encounter God, he says. For on this day of thirst, a midday thirst, a cruel thirst—a thirst that brings suffering, humiliation—we encounter God. Whoever tastes of the water that quenches such thirst, blesses that thirst.

André Myre is a biblical scholar in Montreal. This reflection, written originally in French, was translated by Marg Bacon.

