

Portrait of Father Bobby

By Nimia L. Lacebal

His ways were simple usually made alive with his smiles and intermittent controlled laughter. His thoughts were modest and unassuming, occasionally peppered with brief pastoral humor. His spirits leaped with contagious sensitivity toward the needy, the distressed, the unenlightened. His heart was big, so big it could hold all the cares that beset Filipinos in this ultra modern world of ours. Most of all, his heart bulged with pride over his apostolate program, the Filipino Pastoral Ministry of Our Lady of Pompei Church.

Father Bobby was pre-destined to become a priest. He was not aware of it. He did receive a call, he said...*“from who, how, and when”* He didn't know. *All I could remember was... I was doing my task quietly ... did what I have to do.”*

He entered the Seminary at the age of 11. His high school years, undergraduate and graduate studies gave him much *“joy and satisfaction”*. During his Seminary days, he could not bear to be away from his beloved Seminary for a long time and wanted to go right back even during his visits with his family and friends.

Of his 16 Seminarian classmates, only Father Bobby made it to Ordination. In his early days as a priest, he developed into becoming a priest of the people. He visited village after village in Samar. He loved to be with the barrio people and talked with them about their life and about God to give them strength.

Divine providence again was said to have plucked Father Bobby out from his quiet town of Catbalogan, carried him across the Pacific and planted him in New York – for him to see the thousands of his *kababayans* alone in a strange country, desperate for solace, in need of God's love.

The Migrant Scalabrini Fathers of the Society of St. Charles took Father Bobby in; gave him the full support he needed to develop a Filipino immigrant apostolate program in its Shrine Church of Our Lady of Pompei in Greenwich Village, Lower Manhattan.

Bursting with energy and enthusiasm, Fr. Bobby launched the Filipino Pastoral Ministry in 1988. Not quite comprehensive and not yet completely adequate enough to take care of the immigrants' needs in a foreign country, the FPM began its mission.

The Filipino Pastoral Ministry became the hub of traditional socio-cultural and religious activities of the Filipino residents in the tri-state area. Father Bobby's vision of having a *“Welcoming Church”* for the Filipinos in America where they could comfortably practice their religious traditions; preserve the Philippines rich heritage, have at last become a reality.

The Filipino Pastoral Ministry of Our Lady of Pompei Church reached its 16 years of service to the community in 2003. Father Bobby dedicated 38 years of his life in the service of God with intense

passion. He worked on his vision and mission diligently; implemented its objectives within the framework of the Ministry's mission and goals.

As Associate Pastor of Our Lady of Pompei Church, he won the hearts of the Church's majority parishioners. He delivered his homily with intensity and purpose. He drew over many Italian parishioners to come and join the Filipino Pastoral Ministry's "*kainan*" and religious activities.

He created the Filipino Pastoral Council to guide him in his program. He achieved "unity" (to most was an impossible dream) among the different Santo Nino Prayer Group from the different boroughs of New York. He widely promoted the Good Samaritan Partnership program... reminding.. ***' the next thing to having a priest in the family is to adapt one and to have your family in the heart of a priest.....'***

He initiated "***Mga Happenings sa Village***" ... the Wednesday novenas to Our Lady of Perpetual Help, the *Flores de Mayo*, *Santakrusan* and many other devotional activities. He remembered to help the underprivileged, the victims of natural disasters and the needy Seminary students in the Philippines. Most of all, he showed love for his *kababayans*.

He could not be stopped. He did not want to stop. To him, the Filipino Pastoral Ministry at its 16th year of community service is ***"still young... still searching for a more meaningful and fuller expression of the mission and vision... although its steps are unfaltering, it still has a long way to go to achieve its objectives. The cultural, religious and educational needs of the Filipinos is the reason for its being... "*** He once asked.. ***" What do we want to do 10 years from now.?"***

Father Bobby was not lacking in benefactors and volunteers for his projects. In his graciousness, he carried a high regard for all of them and was appreciative for the things they have done for him. Feeling grateful, he has the following to say...

" how can I stop singing praise of gratitude to the Lord for the wonder, He has done for us. I could only bow down in prayer and in the silence of my heart say "Gracias", "Maraming Salamat", "Thank You".

"I can only promise you my prayer. Rest assured that God who sent His Son can never be outdone in Charity. He will reward you a thousand fold."

To his beloved volunteers... he said the following touching words:

Whatever little bit any one does, certainly makes a difference to the person at hand. In God's overall plan, each of us is important and each of us makes a difference to one or another person...along the way."

Father Bobby was always full of hope.

In 1988 he had this message... ***"Let us join hands in strengthening our identity as Filipinos. I due time, we should be able to accomplish our objectives toward a more unified Community with one God and one Faith as Christian Filipinos."***

"Together we can make bigger strides in our Ministry."

He dreamed and hoped that *“whatever we have at Pompei will be the beginning of many apostolates in the Eastern Seaboard....”*

“Together, as we approach 1990, we say thanks for all that has been. We look with Faith and Hope of what is to come.”

Father Bobby dutifully left us when the Lord called for him. He left a void at Our Lady of Pompei Church... definitely a larger void in the heart of those he helped, his benefactors and volunteers. His spirit will always be there watching over the Filipino Pastoral Ministry as it continues to work its way for another milestone.

Father Bobby Sison, the people’s priest, left a legacy of love of God and of one another and of service.

Nimia Lacebal was a volunteer and former External affairs coordinator of the Filipino Pastoral Ministry.