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# **A Parish in the Mountains**

Deep in the uplands of Porac, Philippines, an indigenous community finally has a church to call their own, thanks to a priest who trekked the mountains and a family who refused to look away. This is the story of how a simple Christmas project with Tesse's grandchildren grew into something much greater.

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Tesse Tinio and her siblings grew up in Angeles City, Pampanga—90 kilometers north of Manila—regularly seeing *Aetas* in town selling their produce from the mountains: papayas, camote (sweet potato), bananas, and more. These *Aetas* come from the nearby uplands of Porac, 15 kilometers from Angeles City.

The *Aeta* (also spelled Ayta or Agta) are indigenous peoples considered among the earliest inhabitants of the Philippines. They are distinguished by their dark skin, curly hair, and short stature, and are known for their skills as jungle survivors, hunters, and weavers. Traditionally nomadic, many *Aeta* families today live in established settlements.

### **A family legacy**

Tesse comes from a family of twelve children—eight boys and four girls—and is the seventh. Growing up, she

and her siblings witnessed their parents' deep and unwavering faith, lived out quietly in prayer and generosity. From them, they learned that faith is something not only to believe, but to practice. Tesse often recalls the serene and prayerful way her mother raised them, despite the daily challenges of providing for a large family. Now retired from real estate work, Tesse carries the same spirit. What her parents modeled at home, she now lives out in the margins. She found joy—and purpose—in serving the *Aeta* communities.

In December 2023, Tesse's youngest daughter, Thea, came from Australia with her family for the holidays. She had a clear intention for the visit: to introduce her five-year-old son, Javi, to the *Aeta* communities near their hometown in Angeles. Thea remembered how she and her two siblings were raised to notice those

often overlooked and underserved. She felt it was time to pass the lesson on.

That Christmas, Javi handed out food packs (rice, canned goods, coffee, powdered drinks, and more) to an *Aeta* community. It gave the children simple joy, but for the families, it was the beginning of something more lasting.

That Christmas outreach became the spark for a growing collaboration between Tesse's family, their friends, and their parish priest in Carmenville Subdivision, Angeles City, Fr. Regnel (Ching) Fuertez. What started as a holiday act of generosity slowly took root as a shared mission. Together, they continue to find creative ways to bring not just aid, but hope, to the *Aeta* communities.

**A parish of seven *Aeta* communities**

In a remarkably short time, their combined efforts bore fruit. Through the generosity of family and friends, they raised funds to build six chapels in the mountains of Porac. Chalices, cruets, and other liturgical vessels followed. They were signs that the *Aetas* were no longer on the periphery of parish life.

Tesse, a supernumerary of Opus Dei, shares that the outreach has transformed her as much as it has helped others. Serving the *Aetas* deepened her own faith and strengthened her family's spirit of service.

She regularly brings her children and grandchildren to distribute food bags and supplies, which are always needed, and to attend Mass with the communities they visit. "I rely on the prayers of everyone for us to continue what we have started,"

Tesse says. For her, this work is not a project; it is a way of life.

In mid-2025, Fr. Ching received a new assignment. From Carmenville Subdivision, he became parish priest of seven Aeta communities in the mountains of *Porac*. The new parish, “Our Lady of the Poor,” located eight kilometers upland from Porac proper, was established on June 11, 2025, by Archbishop Florentino Lavarias of Pampanga.

Before this, Fr. Ching would regularly trek to the mountains to administer the sacraments to the Aetas: baptisms, First Communions, confirmations, confessions, weddings, and Holy Mass. With a parish they could finally call their own, community life began to blossom.

Fr. Ching shares that, thanks to the generosity of people in Pampanga, the *Aetas* now feel that they truly

belong to the Archdiocese of San Fernando. Parish life is vibrant and participative: community members sing in the choir, assist in the liturgy, and celebrate together.

Christmas is especially joyful. Last year, the children's laughter echoed through the mountains when the Jollibee mascot paid them a surprise visit. (Jollibee is a beloved Filipino fast-food chain whose cheerful bee mascot is a familiar and festive figure for children across the country.) Joy, too, is a form of evangelization.

Looking ahead, Fr. Ching notes that many *Aeta* children are still awaiting Confirmation. Catechism classes continue, forming them for confession and helping them appreciate the sacraments more deeply. This is a parish still growing, still learning, and still in need of committed partners in mission.

## **Social outreach activities**

Much of the outreach supported by Tesse's family and friends focuses on two communities: Pidpid and Villa Maria. Pidpid has around 120 families, while Villa Maria has approximately 400. Through sustained support, they were able to build a simple chapel in Pidpid, install solar lights in both communities, provide lighting for basketball courts and mountain roads, distribute school supplies, and give generous quantities of relief goods. Small interventions, yes... but life-changing ones.

There are signs of hope that stretch beyond the mountains. Fr. Ching happily shares that 30 to 33 young *Aetas* are now studying in college in the town of Sta. Rita, Pampanga. They are taking demanding courses such as Elementary Education, Accountancy, Business

Administration, Criminology, and Social Work. These young people carry big dreams and the quiet courage to pursue them. The community hopes that even more *Aeta* children will pursue university studies, beyond Pampanga and even abroad.

The collaboration between Tesse's family and Fr. Ching's parish is a powerful reminder: when ordinary people say yes, extraordinary things follow.

Last January 19, Tesse organized another family outreach in Sitio Pidpid while her daughter Thea, son-in-law Gary, grandson Javi, and two-and-a-half-year-old granddaughter Daniela were home for the Christmas holidays. Joining them were Tesse's teenage grandson Nio, her niece Bea with her son Anton, and her older sister, Doren.

Three pickup vehicles made the journey from Angeles City to Pidpid to distribute rice, canned goods, and grocery items to 100 families. Fr. Ching celebrated Mass that morning, followed by a short program where Aeta children performed their indigenous dance and invited the visitors to join. It was a simple but profound expression of gratitude.

The Porac experience shows that when parents and grandparents teach their children to pause, notice, and serve those who have less, the impact can reach far beyond one generation. What began as an act of kindness is becoming a legacy.

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