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“If we didn’t do our small bit... we didn’t truly love the children.”

An elementary school teacher and her former students reach out to the less fortunate in Antique province, central Philippines.

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The Philippines has recently been touted as one of the fastest growing economies not only in Asia, but also in the world. At the same time, it

reels from persistent, widespread poverty and great income inequality that make the country stand out among its peers, because these show that many have not benefited from the expansion of economic activities.

This reality becomes more pronounced the farther one travels away from key urban centers like Metro Manila, which is nearly 700 kilometers north of Antique, a province in central Philippines where I have lived since birth.

I am a daughter of socially-conscious parents who, in our younger years, would take me and my brother on simple outreach activities to less fortunate households in and around our municipality of Hamtic.

This social awareness was made more keen when I got in touch with Opus Dei in Manila as a college sophomore, more than a decade ago. Fueled by the desire to help victims

of super typhoon Haiyan, in 2013 I participated in a humbling and unforgettable outreach program to Samar province, organized by Iraya Study Center.

Despite the widespread destruction and loss of lives, the locals greeted us with warm smiles. Witnessing their resilience was truly inspiring. We distributed school supplies and food. I vividly recall the cute twins who held their school supplies close to their chest, happily saying, “*Salamato po!*” (Thank you!) We engaged the kids with games and art activities. We helped paint the roofs of houses built by the Gawad Kalinga Foundation.

This desire to serve carried over into my young professional life. And my career as a teacher put me in direct contact with children from families less fortunate than mine.

From my parents, and later from the Work, I have come to realize the significance of that letter of the apostle James, who wrote (2:15-17): *"If one of the brothers or one of the sisters is in need of clothes and has not enough food to live on, and one of you says to them, 'I wish you well; keep yourself warm and eat plenty,' without giving them these bare necessities of life, then what good is that? In the same way faith, if good deeds do not go with it, is quite dead."*

And St. Josemaria Escriva seemed to speak to me on this theme when he wrote in *The Forge*: *"When you really trample on your own self and live for others, then you will become a good instrument in God's hands. He called -- and is calling -- his disciples, commanding them: 'ut eatis' -- 'Go and seek all men'"* (point 915), and *"May you know how to put yourself out cheerfully, discreetly and generously each day, serving others and making*

their lives more pleasant. To act in this way is to practice the true charity of Jesus Christ" (point 150).

Formation talks and prayer have made it increasingly clear to me that one need not venture far to live out one's Christianity fully. Serving others focuses primarily on those immediately around us: our family, friends, colleagues at work; and extends to the less fortunate whom Our Lord places along our path.

Ut eatis

On January 3, 2020, I and five of my former students at Dao Catholic High School in Tobias Fornier town in southern Antique decided to go to Lawigan, a depressed upland community about 30 minutes away, riding on the back of motorcycles, passing through a narrow, winding road with sudden slopes.

It is one of many villages in the country that has not benefitted from standard communication infrastructure like cellular sites or landlines. Some households do not have even the basic sanitation facilities like toilets and running water.

My former students were already in college at this time and we had become good friends. I was heartened by the fact that it was they who broached the idea of undertaking a social outreach activity. We were not out to change the world, but to make a difference in that small corner of the province where we studied, worked and enjoyed life.

We spent half a day at Lawigan Elementary School. There we distributed notebooks, pencil sharpeners, crayons and folders to 30 students. We gave them snacks paid

out of our own pockets. We also spent time playing games with the children.

Rosalina Serguino, the teacher-in-charge at that time, was delighted saying that we were the first group of outsiders to have ever conducted an outreach activity at the school. The gratitude and joy in the children's and residents' faces showed us how even the smallest gestures and gifts can make a big difference to such villagers.

Our impact was apparent even a year later, when a vegetable vendor approached my mother at a market and asked in the *Kinaray-a* dialect: “*Re, bata mo to si Ma’am Mae? Ang nagtukad bala haw sa Lawigan Elementary School imaw ka mga estudyante na? Galiwan-liwan gid pamangkot ang apo ko kun san-o pagid sanda makabalik kay nasadyahan gid tana sa andang pag-*

agto. Duro gid ang anang istorya kanamon pag-uli na." (Translation: Re, is Ma'am Mae your daughter? The one who went to Lawigan Elementary School along with her students? My grandson kept asking me when they would come back because he was very happy with their visit. He was telling us so many stories on our way home.)

Life (and outreach) goes on

The Covid community lockdowns in 2021-2022 temporarily shelved our plans for a follow-up outreach at the school. That did not mean that life stopped at Lawigan. A television show featured the initiative of teachers there to provide a mobile carabao-drawn graduation "stage" that passed by the home of each graduating student for them to have their official photos, even as the entire country was on restrictive lockdown.

Emerging from the pandemic, in December 2022, my friends and I returned for an overnight stay in Lawigan. We went with school supplies, and with a mission to plant 15 saplings of native trees like narra, avocado, dao, as well as abaca. Residents there have been cutting trees to turn them into charcoal or to make furniture -- an major livelihood source for the community.

My friends and I drew inspiration from Pope Francis's May 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si* ("Praise be to You"), which called our attention to "indifference" to nature, "which now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her".

I also recalled St. Josemaria Escriva writing about creation in *Friends of God*: "*God made Adam from the clay*

of the earth, and created for him and his descendants this beautiful world we live in, ut operaretur et custodiret illum, so that we might cultivate it and look after it."

We realized that if we didn't do our small bit to protect the environment, we didn't truly love the children because we would not be looking after the world that they will inherit from us. It is our hope that the example we left in the locals' memories would help them realize their inherent link to the divine creation that surrounds them. This is something that all of us may have taken for granted for too long.

Only the beginning

In January 2024, I went back to Lawigan for three days. Among other things, I wanted to apply what I had learned in graduate school about the varied ways students learn and acquire information.

Blending a wish to share my concern for the environment with “multiple intelligence” approaches to learning, I crafted a lesson plan that enabled students to harness their unique strengths and have a better appreciation of the natural resources within their reach. They explored various mediums to create artworks and handicrafts, e.g., clay or even mud to shape pots, gemstone pictures to form jewelry, a woven cotton fabric from nearby Bugasong town to fashion different styles of *patadyong* (wrap-around dresses), etc.

The effectiveness of this mode of instruction was evidenced by the buzz of excitement in the classroom as students worked on their creations; and the pride with which they presented their works in front of the class. Students talked about how they understood better the link

between natural resources and the livelihood of their communities.

The experience made me realize that the possibilities of addressing unserved needs of people and the environment are endless. I presented the outcome of my “experiment” to the school's teachers as a way of sharing my new-found knowledge about the merits of being creative in imparting knowledge to young minds.

What's next? Well, our efforts and the televised feature on the school have attracted the attention of donors for Lawigan. It is time to look for other schools more in need in more remote areas. And that prospect excites me and my friends.

If there is anything to be learned from this experience, it is that each Christian — being a conscientious citizen — ought to do what she/he can, given limited resources, to help

those less fortunate whom God has placed within our reach. My faith had always guided me to serve others, but it was in the smiles and the sparkling eyes of those children that I truly understood the transformative power of outreach and community service.

This wasn't just about giving supplies or planting trees; it was about cultivating hearts and minds, nurturing a community, inspiring others, and ultimately, glorifying God through action.

Roremae Gacho