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A friendship borne out of prose and poetry

Desmond and Eric share a common interest in poetry and writing. What started out as a mere professional dealing has blossomed into a trusting and beautiful friendship.

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UP UNTIL NOW, the Covid pandemic haunts Eric. He wouldn't want to go through the same harrowing experience of a total lockdown, being

confined to a small house or a shoebox flat in a tiny island state like Singapore and not allowed to mingle around. Of an out-going type, there isn't a single day when he is not out in the streets, meeting and engaging people in conversations over endless meals and tea.

Then came the “Circuit Breaker” on April 7 last year, Singapore's practical approach to contain the rising number of Covid infections in the community. Similar to how electrical switches work to protect against electricity overloading or short circuiting, the Circuit Breaker lasted until June 1 before some restrictions in movement were eased. During this period, people were advised to stay home.

It was during this over a month-long home confinement that Eric got to know plans of Fr Joe Lopez, designated Rector of St Joseph's

Church in Victoria Street, to hold online classes on the rite of Christian initiation (RCIA). Eric asked Desmond if the latter would be interested in the RCIA classes to learn more about the Catholic faith. From the start, Desmond showed interest and Eric journeyed with him throughout the RCIA sessions that ran for several months, until Desmond's baptism in the Catholic Church on Easter Vigil that just passed.

Desmond was raised in a Methodist family. Two of his siblings have always been devout, and remain active in Christian charitable work. One sister converted to Catholicism late in life as well. His maternal great grandfather was a missionary, and founding father of a Methodist church in Malaysia. They all had great influence on Desmond's deep religious sense and who once considered "becoming a man of the cloth". But his God-given talents led

Desmond to eventually fall in love with poetry, the shared interest that made for great conversation and that eventually blossomed into friendship with Eric.

Both knew each other way back in 2011. “I was the judge for a writing competition organised by the British Council, and I chose Eric’s poem as the winning entry,” recalls Desmond. Eric’s winning entry titled “Verses on Bukit Chandu”, a reflection of Singapore’s experience of World War II based on archives kept at an interpretive centre at Bukit Chandu off Pasir Panjang Road, on the west side of Singapore.

“It was a beautifully written poem,” says Desmond. At that time, the literary scene was a much humbler one. Desmond and Eric would invariably bump into one another at literary events. Desmond says, “it was always really easy to have a

conversation with Eric. Eric has a very warm and kind presence. Many writers here (Singapore) easily know him to be the ‘nicest writer around’.”

Eric, on his part, inherited his poetic inclinations. His mother in her late 70s is a Toastmaster and essayist. Eric teaches general paper and literature at the prestigious NUS High, a specialised independent high school programme in Singapore which provides graduates with direct entry into the highly competitive National University of Singapore. In most of his spare time, he is busy socialising in the good sense of the word, actively organising events for the Singapore Poetry Festival which he has been heading for several years. He has co-authored some books, including his very own “A World in Transit”, a collection of *poetic* reflections on the new world order and its protagonists moving

subtly from one geographical space to another.

To engage Desmond, Eric would initiate meetings where he would talk about the Catholic faith. “He was always ‘ministering’ to me”, says Desmond, borrowing a word from his protestant upbringing. The two would exchange small gifts and mementoes such as poems penned in greeting cards, a wall plaque with some meaningful engraved words, and of course, a whole shelf of books on literature.

For some time, both have been collaborating on several artistic and literary initiatives, so much so that Desmond have lost count. They even co-created a new poetic form, the *anima methodi*; subsequently, co-edited an anthology that compiled the best poems of the form.

Recently, Eric asked Desmond to be a Cooperator of Opus Dei, which the

latter confirmed willingly. Eric has also given the first session of the Cooperators' circle to Desmond. "It was about the unity of life in professional work. It was just the sort of spiritual direction I needed. I'd confided to Eric previously about certain challenges at work, and now, he was addressing these personal concerns with such critical intelligence, such Christian wisdom."

"It's become such an important friendship, one that requires no real effort because it just seems so natural and edifying and uplifting," says Desmond. It was a friendship borne out of prose and poetry, although without needing to have a rhyme!

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