

St. Theresa's College, Q.C. is one with the ICM sisters in celebrating their 100 years in the Philippines. For this special occasion, *The Theresian Magazine* features remarkable ICM sisters who have influenced and inspired people to spread the word of God through their missionary works.

The Mission in Motion
An Interview with Sr. Paula Mellaerts
By Beatriz Mendiola IV-2

“You are young people, full of life and hope, dreams... It is today and everyday that God nurtures a seed in you which one day will bear fruit into a vocation as a missionary sister, a married woman, a mother and/or a career woman. A vocation grows out of the goodness and generosity of one's heart. It does not come all of a sudden. So you must try to be studious, caring, understanding, forgiving, enjoying and helping whenever you can, celebrating now as a plant that steadily grows towards a beautiful and unique creation of God. Above all, be grateful to the Lord and to the many people who care for you.” These were the insightful words Sr. Paula Mellaerts, ICM shared with me during the interview with her last on March 2, 2009.

Sr. Paula, a dedicated missionary of the ICM Congregation, came from a devout and huge family of nine children. Since the environment in which she grew up truly valued service and concern for others, this was the way of life she later embraced. This environment was colored by the lectures in their catholic school, her precious communion, her active leadership in varied activities and her early and immense exposure to service and love. She remarks, “Through all these growth-inspiring events in my life, God was nurturing in me the seed of a religious-missionary vocation. I had received so much goodness, care and love, and I also had learned to give myself in service to others. And this gift (or way of life) I desired to live my whole life through, not only among our people, but especially among those who had fewer chances in life because of poverty. Thus, I was attracted to go to a country where the Lord Jesus was not known.”

That was exactly where her vocation led her. Although parting with her loving family was difficult at first, resisting the call was even more difficult. So, when her family grew in acceptance of her calling and wholeheartedly supported her, she entered the religious life in September 1967. Her vocation opened a lot of ministries for her. These included working in

the pastoral ministry, relating with many tribal communities and organizing classes or animation sessions in line with the Congregation.

Through what she terms as her “Pilgrimage of Life”, she relates that the ministries the Lord has entrusted to her drew her closer to Him and made her understand more deeply His love for his people. The relationships that she established with the communities to which she was assigned made her realize that it is “God who is gathering us all unto His own heart while we grow in love for one another.” She emphasizes that doing her tasks well was something to be considered, but the friendships that developed were a deeper experience because they led her closer not only to the people she related with, but even closer to God as well. She greatly values these experiences especially because of the enriching process of being immersed in a new culture from people whose faith was undoubtedly alive.

Because of this, she witnessed the political struggles of the people she related with. In Nakar (Quezon Province), “people work very hard (producing copra, gathering fire-wood and charcoal and going fishing) and still they remain poor. Those who have the permit to buy their products to sell them further earn much more than the farmers and fisherfolk.” Thus, this event challenged her and continues to challenge everyone else to go beyond the personal challenges of facing one’s own weaknesses, fears, attachments, loneliness or conflicts in relationships through silence, prayer and support from our fellowmen. We should be willing to make sacrifices that would benefit the majority—including the earth—like producing less waste, patronizing healthy foods, caring for the weak, reaching out, forgiving and rejoicing with others and sharing as much as we can in solidarity so that we could build this community where “no one is in want.” We should act now for, as Sr. Paula remarks, “as long as someone is oppressed, hurt, hungry or in pain, we cannot be at peace. As long as there are children who need to grow and learn, we have a mission to fulfill...for we are all children of God.”

IN A NUN'S SHOE

The Path to Peace **An Interview with Sister Amelia David, ICM** By: Beatriz Mendiola IV-2

Living in a world of conflicts and misunderstandings, we often find ourselves lost and hopeless. Nevertheless, this feeling of despair is somehow alleviated whenever we realize that there remain ardent searchers for peace amidst the chaotic world. From an interview with Sister Amelia David, ICM on February 19, 2009, I draw six aphorisms accompanied by experiences that encapsulate how peace is achieved as I quote from another article, “[Y]oung or old, child or adult—we all search for peace.”

1. *“When you make a choice, you have to eliminate other choices.”*

Peace starts within us. Once we are able to sort ourselves out, external organization follows. For Sr. Amelia David, ICM, her call was not something she was readily clear about. Although she grew up in a religious family, joined devout organizations in High School and taught for seven years in St. Augustine School, Tagudin with other ICM sisters before entering the convent, it took time before she knew what to do. Eventually, she witnessed how the religious live a spirit of generosity and service for others. She saw how the sisters worked, influenced the communities they were assigned in and gave themselves to all. Right there and then, she knew the life she wanted to live and rooted out the plans which could deter her along the way. She officially entered the religious life in November 1967.

2. *“Getting in the culture of these people is like leaving your own shoes because you are entering holy ground. It was difficult but also enriching”*

Establishing peace entails establishing relationships. Hence, this was what she did when she was sent as a missionary in Zamboanga del Sur. Since she was used to a lifestyle where everyone else is a Christian and is familiar with her ways, adjusting to her assigned community was not at all simple. She needed to learn the basics: the dialect, the culture and the people themselves. More than that, she had to discover how a political assembly runs as one of the members of the Southern Philippine Council for Peace and Development (SPCPD). The SPCPD is a council of elders with

Muslims and Christians whose main goal is to oversee the peace and development of Mindanao.

3. *“We are all longing for peace—everybody—no matter what your faith is”*

As a member of the council, Sr. Amelia realized how diversity can still lead to unity. From what she shared, I paraphrase that of the eighty people in the council, only about five percent were Christians and only ten were women. The group was practically distinct in their religions, viewpoints and ways of living, but they all sought to bring one ideal to reality: peace.

4. *“In trusting people, sometimes you get weak [but all the while] it’s really God who guides you when you are in the mission.”*

Nevertheless, establishing ties with others may lead to occasional gullibility. For some people, trust is as functional in taking advantage as it is essential in forming relationships. Sister Amelia recounted an instance when a lady posed as one of the scholars in Notre Dame Educational Association (where she worked for some time) to get a great sum of allowance. With her trusting attitude, Sister Amelia David would have readily given the money had not the circumstances hindered her to do so. Thus, quick trust does put a lot of things at risk, but God’s protection is enough to defend us from harm.

5. *“It has always been a challenge that we all remain faithful, whether successful or not, so that we can say in the end, ‘I have done my part.’”*

When asked what for her was the greatest challenge she confronted in life, she admitted that she, as everyone else would, has often found it difficult to remain faithful to her vocation. Committing ourselves to a moral obligation is one great thing, but remaining responsible to it is another thing because there are a lot of obstacles which may cause our steadfastness to waver. The path is long and tiring, but when we have reached its end, the inner peace is immeasurable.

6. *“The world has enough for everyone’s need, but not for everyone’s greed.”*

One of the major causes of the absence of peace and unrest in society is the avarice of the few that leads to the deprivation of many people. Hence, I agree with her that if only “people care for each other and give themselves to one another, instead of grabbing everything for themselves, nobody would be hungry.” and, “If everyone works for that, it will be.”

Hence, peace, no matter how long and difficult to reach is truly attainable. As I close this article, may the life of a catalyst of peace inspire and challenge you with the following concluding words: *“Violence will never solve anything. Dialogue is the key to peace and peace can only be achieved if we are really willing to give to one another.”*