

# The Road to the Philippines

(June, 1990)

For the world's poor, the reality of life is the same everywhere. It is a daily struggle against death. That struggle is nearly always a losing battle. Poverty, hunger, disease, homelessness, unemployment, bombs falling from the sky, displacement as refugees, harassment, political persecution, imprisonment, death squads, armed soldiers, ecological disaster, murder, the ever-present U.S. imperialism and global consumerism--the list goes on. The forces of death surround the poor of the world.

From my own experience with the homeless on the killing streets of Washington, D.C. and New York City, to my work in a refugee camp in a bomb ravaged village of El Salvador, to visits to war torn Palestine, Israel, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Northern Ireland, Haiti and Iraq, to various jail cells for civil disobedience against war, I thought I was prepared to enter that reality of life and death when I journeyed to the Philippines in the summer of 1990.

I was wrong. The unjust suffering and brutal violence waged against the poor of the third world is heartbreaking. Life among the poor of the Philippines is a day to day struggle to survive against a system gone mad. Ninety percent of its 60 million people subsist in subhuman misery. The Philippines is a living disaster, a victim of violence and injustice at the hands of U.S. imperialism.

And yet, and yet. The Philippines has demonstrated to the whole world one of the most powerful instances of organized creative nonviolence aimed at a brutal dictatorship which worked. In 1985, thousands of ordinary people trained themselves in the method of active nonviolence, so that when Benigno Aquino returned to face the dictator Marcos and was assassinated at the airport, millions took to the streets in one of the greatest demonstrations of active nonviolence in history. The "People Power" movement forced Marcos to flee after only a few days, and brought his widow, Cory Aquino, to power.

But the energy of nonviolence fizzled after a few months. It never really traveled beyond Manila to the countryside and distant islands where the poverty, oppression and violence continue. In the end, there was no real nonviolent transformation of society toward true justice, only a change of characters, according to most Filipino activists. Though Cory Aquino appeared to be a positive change, the military forces, death squads and brutal police continued to terrorize the oppressed peoples throughout the far corners of the Philippines islands. "A whole way of life is being destroyed," a priest told me during my visit to the Philippines in the summer of 1990. "An entire people continue to be crushed." The realization that the new Aquino government would not relieve poverty, hunger, homelessness and disease brought further despair to the suffering poor. The Philippines is a land of broken promises, broken dreams, broken hearts, broken spirits, and broken bodies.

And yet, the spirit of hope and faith remains, even among the victims of poverty and violence. It is a spirit that if unleashed, could be a lightning force of transforming nonviolence that could oversweep their nation, and even the world. The people of the Philippines possess a revolutionary faith. They are learning the bitter lesson not to place their trust and hope in governments or presidents, but in God alone. As they struggle with God to proclaim God's reign of justice and peace, they are beginning to sense that God is with them, especially among the poor and oppressed, in their

nonviolent struggle for justice and peace. Jesus walks the impoverished islands of the Philippines, inviting people to take hope once again in his way of Gospel nonviolence.

In June, 1990, I journeyed to the Philippines at the invitation of Pax Christi groups in the Philippines and the heroic Archbishop Antonio Fortich to listen and learn from the struggling people, from churchworkers, women, farmers, the urban poor, refugees, prisoners and anti-nuclear activists. They were still recovering from decades of oppression under the Marcos dictatorship, and beginning to enter the post-Marcos struggle. For the poor, the starving, the brutalized masses, the struggle for justice is lifelong, and it's played for keeps.

My travels took me far and wide, from Manila to Bacolod on the island of Negros, in a jitney down south, then by foot along dirt paths, through streams and mud, past many battalions of Filipino soldiers, vigilante death squads, CIA agents and guerrilla revolutionaries, over a memorable bamboo bridge that hung precariously above a creek, a hundred yards below, to a little mountain village of twenty huts called "Cantomanyog."

I visited a dozen such villages and met with their base Christian communities, as well as with Pax Christi groups in the urban slums of Cebu City, the rural hills outside of Kabankalan and the U.S. Naval Base at Subic Bay. But there was something unique about Cantomanyog, something bold and daring that I have rarely witnessed. They live on a far island in one of the most brutalized regions on the planet, under the guns of both soldiers and rebels, yet they dare to call themselves "a Zone of Peace."

A zone of peace! My low-income neighborhood in Oakland, California has been declared both a drug-free zone and a nuclear-free zone, but "a zone of peace"? What would "a zone of peace" situated in the heart of a warzone look like?, I asked myself. In a land ravaged by war, injustice, hunger and poverty, what does it mean to live in peace? In a world where the rich get richer and the poor die, where the permanent war against the poor has been called "peace," what could it mean to declare oneself "a zone of peace"?

Cantomanyog is not reachable by any modern means of transportation. Only a vigorous walk along mud paths and over rickety bridges will take the pilgrim into a countryside all but forgotten by the modern world. Unfortunately, the only outsiders who know about Cantomanyog are CIA agents, U.S. military advisors, and Filipino soldiers engaged in an all out war against the poor. It is in that forgotten land that the people have formed a community to say No to war in the hope that a peace based on justice may someday prevail. The local pastor told us, "The issue here is survival. We are fighting against the powers and principalities, the forces of death, because we want to live."

In 1989, on the island of Negros, 300 children died from hunger as the result of the U.S.-organized bombing raid, "Operation Thunderbolt." Some 35,000 people were evacuated from their bamboo huts throughout Negros because of those bombings. Many village leaders and farmers were killed by the military forces, the vigilantes, or the guerrillas. The people of Cantomanyog began to ask themselves, "Why is this war happening here?" They met on Christmas day, 1989, and decided then and there to issue a statement calling for peace. Their simple declaration was delivered to both the Armed Forces of the Philippines and the New People's Army.

"We want to avoid or prevent conflicts in our place between the military power of the Communist Party and the Armed Forces," their statement began. "This decision means that there will be no firearms allowed inside Cantomanyog, the zone of peace. This will help us improve our means of livelihood and our lives as a whole."

In February 1990, 300 Christians from all over Negros made a pilgrimage in what they called a "peace caravan" to the village of Cantomanyog. Their week-long journey was to culminate in a celebration declaring Cantomanyog a zone of peace. They came close to turning back several times. Soldiers and death squad vigilantes threatened them along the way. On the last day, 300 soldiers and vigilantes blocked their path as they were about to enter the village. But their nonviolent persistence bore fruit. On February 16, 1990, during a worship service and Eucharist, Natividad Epalan, a community leader holding her two-year-old child, read a statement declaring the village of Cantomanyog to be the first "zone of peace" in the Philippines.

"Our village is open to everyone whose intentions are good," she read. "We wish to be free of the danger of weapons of war and death...Therefore, whoever enters this zone of peace should not bring any guns with them."

A wave of joy and peace swept over the Cantonmanyog residents. Many wept. Unarmed, protected only by the hand of God, they returned home to their small bamboo huts. Their declaration for peace stirred the hearts of Filipinos everywhere. Their willingness to risk their lives in a nonviolent stand for peace gave others hope that someday the war might indeed end and the poverty be eliminated.

The zones of peace were originally conceived by Bishop Antonio Fortich. Recognized internationally as the "Oscar Romero of the Philippines," Fortich himself is a walking peace zone. A bishop of the largest city on the island of Negros for twenty-five years, he became a voice of peace and justice for the poor only within the last decade. As government soldiers murdered the poor of his diocese, he began to speak out. He adopted a steadfastly nonviolent approach in his call for justice for the poor and an end to the repression. The more he criticized the military and the Marcos regime, the more death threats he received. He called the Philippines a "social volcano" ready to explode. Loved by the poor and marginalized, Fortich became the object of intense animosity from wealthy landowners and military officers who had once been his friends. In 1985, the Cathedral rectory where he lived was burned to the ground.

Like Archbishop Romero of El Salvador, he began taking in hundreds of refugees from the war-torn countryside into the diocesan seminary. When the new Aquino government continued the repression, he stepped up his criticism. He denounced the government's total war policy and the presence of the U.S. bases, and called for peaceful negotiations, an immediate cease-fire throughout the Philippines, and land reform. In response, the courtyard of the seminary building where he now stayed was bombed while he slept. Today the bullet-riddled walls of that courtyard testify to the danger that he still faces. In July 1989, his name topped a widely publicized death list of twenty-four priests, sisters, base community leaders, and farmers. Worldwide pressure organized by Amnesty International may have helped prevent the massacre of these churchworkers.

A firm proponent of nonviolence and a person of great warmth and humor, Bishop Fortich was subsequently nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for his effort to create the peace zones. Despite constant harassment and death threats, he remains a

strong person of faith. After years of hierarchical silence, Bishop Fortich has become a true disciple of Jesus. He has taken the risk of the cross, staked his life on the pursuit of peace rooted in justice, and tasted the Spirit of resurrection in the process.

"Peace will be truly realized," he said, "if there is real conversion of the heart. The zones of peace, although a small step, can help that conversion happen. It is like a mustard seed. It will bear good fruit, not only on Negros--but throughout the Philippines and the world.

"I have learned over the years that justice must be planted first before there will be peace," Fortich told me the night I arrived in Bacolod. "Peace is the flower of justice. I have also learned that it is not easy to work for peace. It is very risky. Thanks be to God, I have never been hurt in those incidents, but they have given my courage to continue to speak out for justice and peace. I still have fear. This mission for peace, for justice for the poor, is very, very risky. But every day, I get from the suffering poor more courage to continue the struggle. My hope is I the people," he concluded, "and in their constant hope for justice and peace, in their hope that one day, they will have a decent life, food, homes, work, and peace for each other. We always have hope because the poor have hope."

Nearly all Filipinos hope that one day the military and imperial might of the United States will permanently leave the Philippines. For nearly every Filipino, the U.S. military bases represent the unsaid truth that the Philippines is still a colony of the United States. Nowhere is this colonial force clearer than in Olongapo, the home of the U.S. Naval Base in Subic Bay.

Much like San Francisco, Subic Bay is one of the most beautiful ocean inlets in the world. Altogether, five U.S. military installations are located in the Philippines, occupying more than 192,000 acres (an area larger than the state of Massachusetts). Sixteen thousand U.S. troops and hundreds of U.S. civilians are stationed on those bases and some 65,000 Filipinos work there. The Subic Naval Base was originally installed by Spanish colonial power, but when the Philippines became a U.S. colony in 1901, the U.S. took over Subic.

Olongapo is an open wound of poverty and oppression, a wound that is attacked every day. Life on the streets of Olongapo is a dead end. Over 20,000 Filipino women and children are trapped in a downward spiral of prostitution and drug-dealing for the U.S. troops. This "hospitality industry" operates behind a front of countless bars. The tragedy of this nightmare has included the transmission of AIDS from U.S. sailors to Filipinos.

In the midst of this dark night, a handful of former prostitutes and drug addicts began to reach out to others still caught in the trap. The Buklod night care center was formed to offer counseling to women, and the PREDA foundation ("Prevent and Rehabilitate Drug Abusers"), run by Irish Columban missionary Shay Cullen and a dedicated staff of social workers, brought children off the streets and put them into school. While they only saved a handful of the thousands who suffered and died on Olongapo's streets, this outreach was the one hope for these women and children, as long as the United States military remained in power. In the process of serving those in need, Cullen became a leading critic of the deadly U.S. military bases.

"The situation of the Philippines is similar to the historical, political, economic, and religious situation that Jesus found himself in," Shay Cullen told me when I toured

Olongapo and visited PREDA in June 1990. "It's really the same chess game. The script is the same. A foreign power dominates the masses of people who live in poverty and oppression. The elites have sold out to the bribes of this imperial, foreign power. The clergy, like the Pharisees, do not care about the suffering masses but instead are caught up in their rituals. The guerrillas (the NPA) are no different from the Zealots who tried to overthrow the Romans. Meanwhile, the poor, the prostitutes, the crippled, and the children and abused, used, crushed and thrown aside."

"How did Jesus respond to this situation?" Cullen asked. "How would he respond to the situation here in Subic Bay? Jesus looked at the woman caught in adultery, and his first response was compassion. He convinced the authorities not to inflict death. He disarmed them. Prostitution shows up throughout the Gospels, and always Jesus shows great understanding and compassion. But he gets sick and tired of the arrogance of the elite, religious bigots. He confronts them and criticizes their hypocrisy. Taking such a prophetic stand in such a hopeless situation--in a province of the Roman Empire simmering with revolution--could only result in crucifixion. Jesus took his stand accepted the risks. Our situation here in Olongapo is the same. We have to speak out against the U.S. bases while we offer our compassion to the suffering poor, prostitutes and children."

"Tell the people of the United States to come and stand with us in solidarity," Cullen urged, "to stand with us in nonviolent resistance to the forces of evil that are crushing the life out of the poor and the hungry. Tell them that the forces of evil here have their roots in the United States. The hope for true liberation here in the Philippines, for freedom from hunger and the politics of hunger, is that Christians in the United States will stand up and confront the forces of evil in the body politic in the United States, just as Jesus confronted the whitened sepulchers of his day. We expect Christians in the United States to stand up and be counted for Christ's sake."

"If the mothers of the U.S. sailors knew what their sons were doing here, they would force their sons to resign from the Navy and the Air Force," Cullen concluded. "The sailors never write home about what they do here. The U.S. naval base corrupts these young men, not to mention the harm it does to the Filipino people, especially to the women and to the land."

Given the easing of tensions between East and West, the charade of the U.S. military bases in the Philippines was clear: the U.S. was simply protecting its economic control over the millions of poor Filipinos in order to keep the U.S. economy dominant. Though the U.S. claimed for years that the bases were maintained to protect the Philippines, in reality, the U.S. warships and military personnel protect only U.S. business interests in the Philippines and throughout the Pacific rim. These bases were directly connected to the McDonald's, 7-Eleven, and Caltex gas stations found throughout the Philippines. U.S. businesses in the Philippines send billions of dollars back to the U.S. each year, and those companies want the money to keep flowing. The U.S. bases insure U.S. dominance over the Philippines, and thus protect those businesses from being taken over by a Filipino government which would turn that money over to social programs for the poor.

Though the U.S. claims to keep the bases to protect Filipinos, most Filipinos feel less secure with the bases because they have made the Philippines the target for war, even nuclear war. The U.S. stores nuclear weapons in the hills around Subic Bay turn protects the privileged wealthy. Russian officials have told the Philippine

ambassador that Russian nuclear missiles are aimed at the Philippine because of U.S. nuclear missiles in Subic Bay. The U.S. "neither confirms nor denies the presence of nuclear weapons in Subic." The Aquino government's constitution called for a nuclear-free Philippines, yet, nuclear bunkers can be seen plainly from any hill around Subic Bay. "The continuation of the U.S. bases in the Philippines means an ever greater threat to peace," Shay Cullen states. Indeed, the only real threat to the Philippines is the United States.

The idols of nuclear weapons, U.S. imperialism and materialism are upheld at the expense of the poor. Poverty, hunger, homelessness, disease, drug addiction, and illiteracy could be eliminated in a short time with the money and energy used to maintain those bases. "The people of the Philippines are being sacrificed for the U.S. military," the Church Coalition for Human Rights in the Philippines has stated. "Land needed to produce food is used for target practice. Philippine women and children are trapped in a web of prostitution which satisfies the desires of U.S. servicemen. At the same time, U.S. aid given to hold onto the bases continues to strengthen the Philippine military. The military in turn protects the privileged wealthy class against the starving masses who struggle just to survive each day in poverty and oppression."

Through the bases, the U.S. has been able to bankroll, organize and carry out the Aquino government's policy of "total war" against the New People's Army, which means that every Filipino outside of Manila is suspect. The millions of rural poor who live in desperate poverty have become the targets of the U.S.-planned "low intensity conflict." As in El Salvador, the people are the enemy. U.S. tax dollars have provided eighty percent of the helicopters, automatic weapons and other equipment used by the Philippine military in this war against the poor. Bombing operations have forced the evacuation of thousands of civilians, and killed thousands of church leaders, farmers, human-rights lawyers, and trade unionists who advocate human rights, land reform, higher wages, and a removal of the U.S. bases.

A visit to Olongapo makes it clear that the U.S. bases have to go. The U.S. bases threaten peace; destroy the environment; corrupt the lives of the sailors; destroy the lives of the women and children Olongapo; spread AIDS, drugs and addiction; keep the Filipino people oppressed and colonized; do not solve the reality of poverty; endanger the people of the U.S. as well by continuing the global military policy of first-strike capability and nuclear insecurity; promote sexism and racism and the assumption that women and Filipinos are somehow less human than U.S. servicemen; and serve no useful purpose except to ensure the economic growth of wealthy U.S. businesses. The U.S. should withdraw its bases as soon as possible, work to help relieve the Philippines' staggering \$29 billion debt, which has crippled their economy, and provide food to help stave off the widespread starvation. At the same time, the U.S. should eliminate its military role in the Western Pacific and demobilize all its forces in that area.

As one priest told me, the U.S. is a virus that has infected everyone in the Philippines. Even if the bases are removed some day, the hunger, violence, and poverty of the Philippines remain, along with the Filipino dream of made-in-the-USA consumerism. The coming of justice to the Philippines will require a radical transformation of its culture, beginning with the closure of the U.S. bases, the removal of all U.S. control, the development of schools, food, healthcare and jobs, and the renewal of Filipino culture.

As I walked the streets of Olongapo, one of the teenagers from the PREDA center said to me, "I hope Olongapo will live on its own one day. Tell your people to remove the bases and let us live in peace. They exploit us. We don't want them. We want to live in peace."

As more and more people start to challenge the presence of the bases and the Aquino policies, the government steps up the repression. For those who do speak out, the future looks grim. One person who began to pay that price is Jaime Tadeo, national chairperson of the Philippine Farmers' movement. On May 10, 1990, agents claiming to be with the Department of Agrarian Reform entered movement headquarters asking for Tadeo. When he came out to greet them, they arrested him. They were from the National Bureau of Investigation. Unfairly sentenced to eighteen years, Tadeo has been imprisoned since that illegal arrest.

Just like Nelson Mandela, the imprisoned Jaime Tadeo has become a symbol of the Filipino struggle for justice and peace. He is respected nationally and internationally as a charismatic leader of farmers who advocate genuine agrarian reform in a country still entrenched in feudalism, colonialism, and imperialism. Seventy percent of all Filipinos are farmers. "Land reform is God's tenth commandment," Tadeo told me when I visited him in prison. "'Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's goods,' including land."

Tadeo has been persecuted under the Marcos regime for his outspoken stand, but it was his criticism of the new Aquino regime that landed him in prison. After Cory Aquino came to power, she invited Tadeo to join a national committee to write the new constitution. As the brutality of the Aquino regime increased, as the number of arrests, disappearances, bombings and assassinations grew, Tadeo began to speak out as boldly as ever. He criticized the U.S. military bases, much to the anger of the U.S. Embassy, and maintained his call for true land reform. His imprisonment on trumped-up charges represents a new step in the U.S.-backed program of low-intensity conflict. All those who organize the poor in a demand of social justice will now be silenced, one way or another.

The Philippine National Penitentiary, south of Manila, where Tadeo is imprisoned, is a medieval prison built for 200 people but currently warehousing some 800 men, most of them because of their work for social change. Tadeo reminded me of Cesar Chavez. He manifests the same humble, spiritual commitment to justice. "The passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus is the story of the Filipino people," he told me. "Right now, we are experiencing that passion and crucifixion. But one day, we will experience the resurrection. The suffering and martyrdom of our people will strengthen and increase the people's movement," he declared with a smile. "We will inherit the kingdom of justice."

"I talk with the other inmates about creating a new society where there will be no prisons for the poor like this one," he continued, "but instead, a society where land, education and jobs will be available to all people."

Although he faces many years of suffering in prison, his spirit, like that of the oppressed peoples of the Philippines, remains strong. "Haven't we said that to be incarcerated is part of the sacrifice for the struggle?" he wrote to his friends shortly after his arrest. "How can one be free without first being imprisoned for the struggle for justice? How can one resurrect without first dying? My imprisonment is but a prelude to another chapter in the struggle for the poor of the Philippines."

This spirit of dedication and commitment is the same spirit I encountered among the sufferings people of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. In a refugee camp in El Salvador, men and women who had lost their families, homes, and land, told me through their tears that God was with them and that one day, they hoped to live in a just society where war and hunger no longer exist.

In one of the most forsaken, terrorized villages on the island of Negros, I discovered that same powerful spirit of hope. Churchworkers and base-community members have been waging a war against poverty and injustice on Negros for years. Now, however, the low intensity conflict, the "total war" policy of Cory Aquino, has reached them in full force.

One evening, I was invited to a base community meeting, one of the hundreds of thousands of Christian cells that make up the body of Christ, the church of the poor, throughout the third and fourth worlds. I found myself crouching in a crowded bamboo hut, which stood about four feet off the ground, in case of typhoons. Most of the people in the group were women, and most of them were actually physically starving from lack of food. All were severely malnourished. One pregnant mother of eight children told me she had not eaten for several days. They had no work, except for an occasional day in the field planting sugar cane. They did not make enough to survive, since the landlords took all the profits of their labor, and so, they were dying.

A "military detachment" of soldiers, committed to Cory Aquino's "total war" policy, was stationed on either side of the village.

We all sat down on the bamboo floor and read from the Gospel of John. Then, for about fifteen minutes, every one took their turn offering a reflection on the scripture and their life together, when all of a sudden, sixteen armed guerrilla revolutionary soldiers came walking through, stopped at the door of our hut, looked in on us, and then moved on. We returned to our scripture sharing. About fifteen minutes later, a dozen armed Filipino death squad soldiers came by. They stood in the door, asked what we were doing, and then moved on.

We were in the middle of a war zone.

I suddenly got very scared when all of a sudden, at that very moment, the group broke into song. "We are the church! We are the church! We are the community of peace and love!"

I was totally stunned. The simplicity of the lyrics, the poverty and hunger, the hard bamboo floor, and their warm hospitality hit me like the bamboo stick of a Zen master. Here indeed is the church of peace and love, standing in the middle of a warzone, refusing to side with either side, taking sides with the unarmed Christ, loving one another and their enemies.

We first world North Americans think the world revolves around us. We assume that we are the center of the world. We first world Catholic Christians claim that the center of the church lies in Rome, or New York. How quick we Americans are to pronounce the first and last word about Christian life today! In our arrogance, we think we have a monopoly even on God.



But here I saw with my own eyes how in reality everything is upside-down. The center of the church, the center of reality stands among the poorest of the poor, with the marginalized, the persecuted and the oppressed, the victims of first world violence, the ones who suffer but who refuse to give up the nonviolent struggle for justice. They are victims of U.S. violence, military violence, vigilante violence, revolutionary violence, institutionalized violence, and nuclear violence--and yet, they are the locus of Christ's peace. They reveal the justice of God. They are the church. They show us the meaning of peace. They illustrate a vision of what it means to be human. They demonstrate what a community of love is. In the midst of war, in a situation of absolute poverty and hungry, they share what they have with one another trusting that God will see them through this injustice. It is this manifestation of selfless love which marks the presence of God among them. God is with them because they are the oppressed of the earth, because they are faithful and hopeful, because they follow Jesus on the path of nonviolent love.

The Philippines! Such a sad tale of oppression, injustice, victimization, hopes betrayed, murder, terrorism and war. Marcos has come and gone, along with a nonviolent battle for freedom that caught the world's imagination. But the blood flow continues, along with the hunger, the burial of children in cardboard boxes, the poverty, the suffering. The world watched the Philippines for four days in February 1986, then turned away. Since then, CIA and U.S. military officials have orchestrated a well-planned laboratory of war and imperial domination. The U.S.-backed low-intensity conflict aims to keep the poor poor, divided and at each other's throats so that the economic robbery of global politics can continue. Through it all, the U.S. culture brainwashes the Filipino people with empty dreams of Marlboro country, Disneyland, Coke, and blue jeans. In so many ways, Filipinos forsake their own spirit and soul under the spell of Legion, the evil spirit sheltered in the Pentagon.

The Philippines has become another El Salvador and the United States is to blame. Like so many other third-world victims, the Philippines lies on the side of the road bleeding and dying like the brutalized man in the parable of the Good Samaritan. In this case, the U.S. is the international bully that robbed and beat up the Philippines. For the suffering Filipinos, there is no international Good Samaritan to come to their aid. The message I heard over and over again in the Philippines was heartbreaking: "We are starving. Life is harder than ever. We want rice. Do what you can to stop the persecution, the war, the U.S. imperialism, so that we can grow food and live in peace." The political reality was summed up for me when my friend, noted activist Karl Gaspar, kept referring to Mrs. Aquino in our conversations as Mrs. Marcos.

After walking through the war-torn countryside of Negros, witnessing the bombings of poor villages, hearing the horror stories of military raids and vigilante, death-squad atrocities, the tales of the internal refugees, and the violence done to those who call for the removal of the U.S. bases in Olongapo, after seeing the hidden world of the suffering, urban poor in Cebu and Manila, and looking upon the imperial presence of the U.S. bases in Olongapo, I realized that the U.S. sponsored low-intensity conflict has now reached frightening proportions. Every right-wing fanatical group has been armed to pit Filipino against Filipino in order that they do not unite to oppose U.S. imperial domination. "The U.S. wants to create chaos in the Philippines to maintain its market," one Filipino nun told me. Another put it more directly: "Tell the United States we do not want your help if all you can give us is war and weapons and poverty."

More and more people are beginning to look at the world through the paradigm of peace. But now, as the poor of the third world are telling us, it is time to see the world through the paradigm of liberation as well. We need to understand that war is oppression, that low-intensity conflict, nuclear weapons, and U.S. military bases mean hunger, poverty, homelessness, misery and death for the poor of the third world. Likewise, peace is liberation. The reign of peace, that is, the abolition of war, nuclear weapons, bombing raids, military aids and death squads, means liberation for the poor. It means food, clothing, housing, healthcare, education, freedom and dignity for everyone. This work of liberation is the work of peacemaking for the third world poor. The road to the Philippines is a journey into that paradigm shift.

Walking through the slums of Manila, amid the trash, urine, feces, dogs, shacks, fish bones, mud, rocks, smog and noise, I felt defeated. How can people live in such squalor and misery? I asked myself. The answer was devastating: they do not. They die--by the thousands, by the millions. Children die every day. All die before their time. Such is poverty, as Jon Sobrino says, "an early and unjust death."

And yet, and yet, there is hope. Voices of sanity do cry in the wilderness of the Philippines. Though the U.S. uses the Philippines to steal its natural resources and control the Pacific region, the struggling poor are turning the Philippines into a laboratory of peace, nonviolence, liberation and justice. Bishop Fortich, Jaime Tadeo, Karl Gaspar, the great nuns and priests, the thousands of base-community members, the women, the prisoners, farmers and children--all live the daily struggle for justice and peace. Every day they articulate a new vision of God's reign coming to their islands, when everyone will have food, housing, clothing, medicine, education and employment. One day, the Philippines will be liberated from U.S. imperialism, economic control, soldiers, bombs, and nuclear weapons. One day, the Philippines will wake from their nightmare to a new day of peace, justice and freedom.

May the God of peace and justice grant the struggling people of the Philippines courage and strength for the road ahead. May they continue to speak and resist, and know the risen Christ. And may the people of North America support their nonviolent struggle for liberation by working for the abolition of war, hunger, poverty and nuclear weapons.

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[Note: The great Archbishop Fortich died on July 1, 2003. His funeral was attended by over 20,000 people. For information, see:

<http://home.catholicweb.com/bishopfortich/index.cfm>

The U.S. nuclear weapons station at the Clark Air Force Base was closed after the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo on June 9, 1991. But after September 11, 2001, U.S. military intervention in the Philippines dramatically increased under the pretext of combating "terrorism."

For further information, see "the Network in Solidarity with the People of the Philippines," at: [www.nispop.org](http://www.nispop.org)]