

Víctor José L. Lluch OAR: A Friar with a Fantastic Foresight

Víctor Lluch and Teodora Leonar of Iligan City were the parents of Víctor José who was born on 1 May 1935. The young Víctor José finished his elementary studies in his hometown and proceeded to San Carlos in Negros for his secondary education. He finished philosophy at the Jesuit-run San Jose Seminary in Quezon City. After his novitiate, he professed the vows on 5 July 1961 at Monteadudo, Navarra, Spain. He went on finish his theological studies at Marcilla, Navarra, where he received his priestly ordination on 18 July 1965.

Fr. Lluch's first assignment was Colegio de San Jose-Recoletos [CSJ-R] in Cebu City, first as Property Custodian, Dean of Student Affairs, then as Vice Prior of the religious community and Vice Rector in 1967-1969. In June 1970, at 35, he became the first Filipino and youngest Rector of the future University of San Jose-Recoletos when the Spanish Rector Fr. Miguel Navarro resigned his post in the wake of violent student protests of the First Quarter Storm that rattled the nation since January 1970 and of the demise in March of a Josenian student who was going out of the school and fatally hit by a Molotov cocktail.

It was in 1973-1974 in Baguio City that fully brought out Fr. Lluch's penchant for dramatics. After some months, he shared his dramatic skills and talent with the seminarians of Seminario Mayor-Recoletos [now Casiciaco Recoletos Seminary] with some help from four imported members of CSJ-R Dramatics Guild which he had set up in Cebu City. He thus started the tradition of *Himig Recoleta* [Recollect Melody], a variety show which adapted Broadway musicals, which even directly involved such formators as Fr. Emeterio Buñao, Fr. Huberto Decena and Fr. Dionisio Cachero in their productions and made the formation house known locally and in adjoining towns that could hardly believe the formands' amazing talents for music and drama.

New York City was his next assignment where he studied at Fordham University and simultaneously exercised his pastoral work at Saint Roch Parish in the Bronx. In 1979, he was appointed prior of Cavite and president of San Sebastian College. Cavite would be his favorite assignment much more than his other ministries. He would be elected local prior and college president of Cavite once more in 1994 and local prior in 1999-2003. He was president of San Sebastian

College Manila for two triennia (1982-1988). He was elected vicar provincial of the Vicariate of the Philippines and China in 1988, the first Filipino to hold the position in the Recollect history that started in 1606.

Fr. Lluch was elected vicar provincial for a second triennium in 1991-1994 and in 1997 for a third triennium but he was designated prior provincial by the General Chapter whose 36 delegates voted unanimously on 28 November 1998 to create the new Province of Saint Ezekiel Moreno. The inauguration of the new Province took place on 10 February 1999 at Our Lady of Consolation Parish Church in Mira-Nila, Quezon City. He was not able to attend the first provincial chapter as prior provincial when he had to undergo a heart surgery. Thereafter, he occupied his post as local prior of Cavite City. But his health gradually deteriorated but he stayed in Cavite, free from any responsibility. He would regularly travel to the hospital in Manila for dialysis. While he was confined for some time at Saint Luke's Medical Center in Quezon City, he followed the events and projects in Cavite until he rejoined his Maker on 18 June 2004.

His 2004 obituary depicted him as a great fighter, one of the most picturesque friars to be remembered by those close to him. He displayed his love for the company of his Filipino confreres by organizing out-of-town excursions like those two memorable fun-filled days in June 1981 at Kaliraya Lakeside, location of the classic movie *Apocalypse Now*, at Cavinti, Laguna. He regularly organized weekend basketball games with Filipino confreres from Cavite, Manila and Tondo, almost always followed by a hearty dinner of *tahong* [shellfish] and other seafoods for which Cavite is much-known, and by bonding moments. As the Province grew in number of confreres, fraternal bonding and camaraderie were done by batches or clusters at beach resorts and heritage sites but the main aim remains the same.

Fr. Lluch was providentially endowed with a fantastic foresight. With the total assistance of his superiors, of his vicarial council or fellow vicarial councilors, he earnestly prepared for the eventual creation of the new Recollect province. A video presentation showed the future province's capability to stand firmly on her own, in terms of finances, vocations, sacerdotal ordinations, religious houses, promotion of the Order's heritage, structures and sustainable growth of communities. The construction of school edifices, seminaries, a retreat house [Talavera], and an oratory [Bacolod City] preceded the 1998 creation of Saint Ezekiel Moreno Province. The construction of the new buildings of Santo Tomas de Villanueva Formation House in San Carlos City (1996), then Blessed Ezekiel Moreno Novitiate in Antipolo City (1991), Recoletos Formation Center in Mira-Nila, Quezon City (1985) complemented the Casiciaco Recoletos Seminary in

Baguio and thus completed the four stages of Recollect formation. The first batch of formands under the Pre-novitiate Program commenced in 1997 at Antipolo.

The author of *Bishop Ezekiel Moreno, an Augustinian Recollect Saint among Filipinos* was tasked by Fr. Lluch and by Pastoral Ministry Secretariat President Fr. German Chicote in 1992 to write about the fifteen-year pastoral ministry of the Saint in the Philippines. The then Vicar Provincial told him that we should disseminate the life and ministry of this exemplary missionary who loved our ancestors so much because he would be the patron saint of our Philippine Province. The book launch was on 6 February 1994. It coincided with the visiting Prior Provincial Carlos Imas who blessed and inaugurated the Bulwagang Recoletos Complex at Alondras Street, Miranila Homes, Congressional Avenue Extension, Quezon City. The huge edifice now houses Saint Ezekiel Moreno Museum, Saint Augustine Library, Fray Juan de la Concepción Archivo Recoleta, Fray Francisco Sádaba Conservation and Restoration Laboratory and Fray Víctor Lluch Atrium for seminars, conferences, one-day recollections, for birthday, wedding and anniversary celebration.

The “picturesque” priest from Iligan City shall always be remembered for his great influence in everything. The Filipino Augustinian Recollects are grateful today to that confrere named Fray Víctor José Lluch, the friar with a fantastic foresight.