

Bishop Bienvenido Tutud: “The Lamplighter”

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In the last issue of Inter-Religio, it was reported that Msgr. Bienvenido Tutud a long-time collaborator with the Gowling Memorial Research Center in Marawi City, had died tragically in an air crash. The following brief memorial was prepared by one of his colleagues and friends.

In life and in death Bishop Bienvenido Tutud sought obscurity and anonymity. Two weeks after Philippine Airlines flight 206 crashed into Mount Ugu, Benguet, Philippines, killing all fifty passengers and crew aboard, the remains of Bishop Tutud have not yet been identified.

People who knew him well say that Bishop Benny, or Tatay (Father) as he is affectionately called by his flock and friends, was a man of many talents. But all agree that he was also a man of great simplicity, graciousness, and humility.

In a country where professional rank and hierarchical titles are considered to be very important, Bishop Benny never paraded his episcopal title. He died as he lived. In the passengers' manifest published immediately after the tragedy, he was listed as Ben Tutud. Within a day or so, once it became clear who he was, the list was amended to include his episcopal title.

“Bishop Benny would have chuckled at this effort to re-clericalize him,” said Columban Fr. Sean McDonagh. “Even in death he preferred to remain anonymous, yet his life and work speak volumes, especially in the area of Muslim-Christian dialogue.”

Born in Cebu City on March 22, 1931, he was ordained a priest on February 2, 1959, in Boston, Massachusetts. During the early years of his priesthood, he served in his native diocese of Cebu. His popular radio program “Introibo ad altare Dei” (I will go unto the altar of God) made him a household name throughout much of the Visayas.

In 1968, he was ordained auxiliary Bishop of Dumaguete. Three years later in 1971, he was transferred to Mindanao as Bishop of the newly created Prelature of Iligan. Here the life of the popular bishop took a dramatic turn.

The early 1970's saw an upsurge in violence between Christians and Muslims in Mindanao, especially in the Cotabato and Lanao provinces.

Bishop Benny was deeply touched by the massacres, ambushes, and evacuations that followed in the wake of the violence. He experienced the pain and tragedy of it all and resolved to respond in the way he knew best.

He realized that the solution to the violence and misunderstanding between Muslims and Christians would come not through military victories, but by a delicate and painful process of dialogue, said a priest who was Bishop Benny's companion in Marawi for five years.

To prepare himself for this dialogue and in order to understand Muslims and their religion more thoroughly, he decided to return to school—perhaps the first bishop in modern history to do so.

He was not content with the generalized slogan, "Let's love our Muslim brothers." He set out to understand them deeply and learn from them. He spent one year—1974-1975—studying Islam at the Institute for Arabic and Islamic studies in Rome.

During that year he was privileged to have a very important meeting with Pope Paul VI. At this meeting, the Pope encouraged Bishop Tutud to dedicate his life to improving Christian-Muslim relations. The Pope suggested that he set up a special ecclesiastical jurisdiction dedicated to Christian-Muslim dialogue. Thus, the Prelature of Marawi was born. Bishop Tutud stepped down from his office as Bishop of Iligan and became the first Bishop of the Prelature of Marawi, a jurisdiction consisting of only four parishes. The population of the Prelature is over 90% Muslim.

Bishop Tutud cooperated with Muslims and other Christian groups in trying to build bridges of dialogue between Christians and Muslims in Lanao. But his ministry was never confined to Muslims or Christians. He was the first chairman of the Episcopal Commission on Tribal Filipinos (ECTF). Through his work in this area he touched peoples' lives from the Cordilleras in the Northern Philippines to Job in the South.

An accomplished and very popular speaker, he was often called upon to speak on inter-religious dialogue in various parts of the Philippines and in Asia. His knowledge, experience and sensitivity in this area enriched the universal Church. Two years before his tragic death he became a member of the Secretariat for non-Christians in Rome.

His flock and friends consider Bishop Benny as a man for all seasons. His ready smile and his jovial demeanor endeared him to many people. His hospitality and openness were legendary. Over the years many people came to Marawi to visit him. They always found a listening ear, an open heart and a man who was especially happy to affirm and support men and women who were working for peace, justice and universal solidarity. Though Bishop Benny was deeply rooted in his Cebuano culture, there were no artificial barriers in his life. He was at home with Maranaos, Siquijodnons, Americans, Irish, Thai or people of any race or creed. He showed respect and a delicate sensitivity towards everyone he met. In tense situations his humor and graciousness often cut through curtains of hostility and suspicion.

In the life and person of Bishop Tutud, Filipinos have an example of Christian sanctity lived at the cutting edge of the most crucial problem facing the Philippines and indeed the world today: how to find a way for people from different cultural and religious backgrounds to live together in peace, harmony, and mutual respect.

One brief article cannot catch the spirit and impact of Bishop Tutud's life and work. His life can be compared to a Sri Lankan New Year's celebration. At the start of the year, the abbot in the local monastery lights a 12-month vigil lamp. But to keep the light burning throughout the year, each family in the village must at one time or another pour their oil into the lamp.

Bishop Tutud has lit a "lamp" of understanding and love among Christians, Muslims and Tribal Filipinos. Every Filipino has the responsibility to keep the flame alive.