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Aiming at transformation of the world

Thomas C. Fox | Jul. 13, 2010

Sr. Mary John Mananzan (NCR Photo/Thomas C. Fox)

QUEZON CITY, PHILIPPINES -- On a narrow street, tucked within some astonishingly poor neighborhoods, is the Institute of Formation and Religious Studies, which for more than 40 years has been developing church leaders, mostly women religious, while teaching personal empowerment and feminist thought.

The quality of the education, which deals with a wide range of pastoral and scholarly church matters, is first rate, and now attracts students from throughout Asia.

I spent a morning at the institute this spring, meeting with more than a dozen faculty members, most of them women religious who are very much tuned in to church and world events and who believe education is the key to battling injustices, whether inside or outside the church.

Initially founded in 1963 by the Association of Major Religious Superiors of Women in the Philippines to offer young women religious better academic and spiritual training, the institute was then called the Sisters Formation Institute. At that time its courses were based on the Jesuit curriculum for seminarians at the local Ateneo de Manila University.

Slowly, however, as the voices and positions of women religious grew in the Philippines in the 1970s, paralleling a growth of the women?s movement in the United States, women religious took control of the institute.

Programs and courses began to reflect and respond to the changing character of the post-Vatican II church. Some courses were pastoral in nature, teaching specific church ministries. Others began to be tied to pressing social and economic problems that plagued the Philippines. Immersion studies were initiated so students could live with and better understand the lives of those they were called upon to serve.

As word of the institute and its work spread, it began to draw both men and women, lay and religious.

The time came for a name change to reflect the institute?s broader mission. That?s when it became the Institute

of Formation and Religious Studies. Having gained its own accreditation rights, it began offering both undergraduate and graduate degrees in scripture study, theology, women and religion, and spirituality.

From an initial enrollment of sisters from 13 congregations in 1963, the institute now boasts that it has taken in students from more than 80 congregations of men and women, coming from over 20 countries.

?This institute was started by the women religious on the belief that women have to be real disciples of Jesus,? said faculty member Emelina Villegas of the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. ?Given the demanding needs of these times, we knew this could not be done without providing formal education.?

In some ways, the changes that have taken place at the institute mirror changes among Philippine women religious communities.

Following the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s, women religious left their convents and many took on new social apostolates. Some took up causes to aid the poor. Some got involved in environmental concerns. Others began work aimed at bridging the gaps between Catholic and Muslim communities. In each instance, the theological and scriptural bases of the corporal works needed further articulation. The institute has been provided this articulation in abundance.

According to Villegas, the institute tried at first to respond to the needs of women religious ?in a kind of supermarket style.? She said people would come, look through the course list, and choose ?this one or that,? depending on need. ?It was more what the sisters were doing, or would be doing, what kind of background they would need, and maybe also, in a way, it would serve their own spiritual development.?

As the institute grew, however, its leaders began to realize that more formal training in religious studies and theology was necessary to fully prepare up-and-coming women religious leaders.

So the institute developed a two-track curriculum: one, to meet specific pastoral needs; the other, to offer a one- or two-year degrees in religious studies and theology. The institute offers both undergraduate and master?s degrees.

Since the 1990s, which brought new openings of China, Myanmar and Vietnam, Catholic students began to come to the institute from these countries.

The number of young men and women entering religious life has fallen in the Philippines in recent years. This has meant that the proportion of lay men and women to religious has grown within the institute. This year some 132 students are taking courses here.

The spirit and energy of the institute grows out of the dedication of dozens of educators, but perhaps no better personified than in the fiery spirit of Benedictine Sr. Mary John Mananzan, institute secretary and faculty member.

As a feminist activist, she has given birth to a number of women-centered programs both here and at a women?s institute she founded at St. Scholastica?s College in Manila. Mananzan is an energetic educator, writer and speaker. The Benedictine speaks of her work as ?contemplative activism.? She likes to remind people that the church she belongs to is ?the people of God.?

The story is told that when a plainclothes policeman asked her once why a nun like her was involved in political rallies, she said it was unlikely he would understand the practice of ?total and complete salvation.?

It was a teaching moment. What she said to him was this: ?Anyone who enters the religious life through, for

example, teaching, nursing or social work commits herself primarily to the preaching of the Gospel, and if the Gospel preaches against injustice, then she must have the readiness to promote justice by defending human rights and engaging in effective action.?

Empowering women as a means of combating injustice is core to her identity, Mananzan told me. Equality, she said, can only be achieved if there is no more violence against women.

In a conference room on the third floor of the institute, a large poster boldly proclaims the four values that characterize the curriculum. It reads:

> Contextual -- rooted in Philippine, Asian and Third World realities in order to gain a deeper understanding of the religious, cultural, social, economic, political and environmental contexts so that the Gospel might be brought to bear as a historical force for the transformation of society.
>
> Transformational -- responsive to the call of the Spirit and the signs of the times which demand the transformation of individuals, relationships, communities, institutions and structures so that ?all may have life and have it to the full? (John 10:10).
>
> Integrated -- guided by scriptural, theological and pastoral reflections rooted in human experience and contemporary issues; cognizant that justice, peace and ecological concerns are essentially related to the Gospel message and that genuine Christian formation can only happen in a community setting.
>
> Inclusive -- incorporates the perspectives of women, indigenous peoples, and other marginalized sectors; the insights of other religious traditions and spiritualities; and the concern for the integrity of creation.

Those characteristics boil down to this: running a Catholic educational institution deeply committed to liberation and justice and aimed at the transformation of the world. A tall order, perhaps. But the women who run this institute do not dream small dreams.

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