

## **Father Niall O'Brien – "The Authentic Missionary"**

I first learned of Father Niall O'Brien, an Irish Columban Priest who was a missionary in the Philippines, last year when I was given the assignment to read his book Revolution from the Heart. I was immediately captivated by him and his story of non-violent activism. Ateneo de Manila University described Father O'Brien like this, "Throughout his priestly life as a missionary in our country he embodied for all who met him and got to know him the truest meaning of Christian mission for our time and for every time...he incarnated in fullest measure a most genuine "preferential love for the poor" and a true sharing of their every "joy and hope," their powerlessness and vulnerability, even in prison and under threat of death...[he was a] true disciple of Jesus with his great gifts he enkindled hope in all those he encountered." (Coyle)

Father O'Brien began his life in 1939 in Dublin, Ireland. He joined the Columban Seminary in Ireland and was sent to the Philippines in 1964. He spent most of his time in the Philippines on the island of Negros, where there were large sugarcane plantations and even larger amounts of destitution, poverty and injustice. He became immersed in the culture, language and lives of his new people. Father O'Brien began to actively and boldly promote the Church's social teachings: "The Church's teaching is unambiguous with regard to the pursuit of justice. Christianity is grotesque when it turns it's back on justice. It's not Christianity, it's something else." (Cullen)

He helped organize and train lay leaders at Samaria retreats in the community's native language, assisted in setting-up base Christian communities and even a farmers' co-op based on the kibbutz system in Isreal, to help local farmers see their dignity as humans and as workers. (NEGROS NINE Human Development Foundation, Inc.) The peasants who were taking part and witnessing all of this were "given hope and were soon forming strong resilient Christian communities that were standing together against violence, torture and state sponsored murder." (Cullen)

This organization, advocacy, love and support for the oppressed did not go unnoticed by the Marcos Regime that was controlling the Philippines at that time. In 1983 Father Niall along with 8 others were charged with the murder of Pablito Pablo Sola, who was the mayor of Kabankalan, in February 1983. The revolutionary group, The New People's Army, had claimed responsibility for the murder, but the "Negros Nine" were held in jail on the trumped up charges for nine months before being released. Rather than discrediting the group, as the regime had hoped, the trial and international outcry shined a light on the injustice and the Negros Nine became even brighter beacons of hope. (Cullen)

Father Niall O'Brien, after spending over 40 years as a missionary to the people in the Philippines, died on April 27, 2004 in Pisa, Italy at the age of 64. (Tyrrell) Ateneo de Manila University awarded Father Niall the Bukas Palad Award posthumously calling him 'the authentic missionary.' A term they said was a recognition of the "passion with which [he bore] Jesus'

dream of the Father's Kingdom in [his] spirit, by the love of the heart of Christ for his people which shape[d] everything in [his] life, and a life unceasingly laid down with joy "for love of his friends." (Coyle)

Father Niall O'Brien left behind him not only a fascinating story, multiple books, and many people who loved him but a true legacy of non-violent gospel justice and authentic love, which can inspire us all. May we all stand up for the oppressed in our lives, communities and around the world as bravely and with such pure love as Father Niall.

*Written by Nicole Henrichs. Parish Social Ministry Coordinator for Catholic Charities and co-chair of the Diocesan Social Concerns Committee.*

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