Blog



Roman Catholic nuns join hundreds of protesters as they gather at the People Power Monument to mark the 31st anniversary of the near-bloodless revolt that toppled the 20-year-rule of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos Saturday, Feb. 25, 2017, in suburban Mandaluyong city northeast of Manila, Philippines. (AP/Bullit Marquez)



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As sisters in the Philippines were led to detention or prison for protesting and advocating for justice during the Marcos era of 1972-1986, a thought persisted: "What should I be doing as a follower of Christ? Belief in Christ is not enough. We are called to 'follow Christ.' "

According to historian Mina Roces, in a recent lecture titled "Reflections on the Filipino Catholic Nun as Feminist and Militant Activist" — drawing from her book *Women's Movements and the Filipina: 1986-2008* — these sisters' passion for their mission inspired lay women and new entrants to religious life to follow their lead.

Roces' stories transported me back to when I visited projects in the Philippines as the director of the Hilton Fund for Sisters. I had personally walked with some of those sisters into Mindanao mountain communities to meet groups of families fighting against military intimidation. I accompanied others to Manila urban communities of women, empowering them to claim identities beyond being wives and mothers, realizing inner strength to stand up against exploitation and abuse. I was so excited when what I had witnessed with my own eyes and experienced with my own feet has been recently studied and named.

Most notably: that the sisters I met on my visits never identified as activists or feminists.

Their feminist work had a different focus than that of the second-wave feminist movement in the United States. They were not fighting for sexual freedom often associated with middle-class women; rather, their activist energies were focused on justice for poor urban and rural women suffering and exploited by both societal and church patriarchy. Their goal was to listen deeply to them and offer different ways of seeing themselves that could liberate them from oppression. It was exciting for me to hear how lives were being changed and how happy mothers were for their daughters' futures.



Sr. Mary John Mananzan speaks at a 2025 protest on the 40th anniversary of the EDSA Peoples' Revolution that ousted the Marcos dictatorship. (Courtesy of Mary John Mananzan)

I usually visited small communities of sisters working in remote areas. Some were missionaries from other countries, some were native Filipinos, and some were intercongregational groups, each focusing on specific issues in local geographical areas with urban or rural poor. Most in the Mindanao region belonged to SAMIN (Sisters' Association in Mindanao) — an advocacy group that is still very active in protecting rights of farmers, fisherfolk, Indigenous groups and youth. In her lecture, Roces identified several congregations that many of the sisters belonged to: Maryknoll Sisters, Good Shepherd Sisters, Missionary Benedictines, Religious of the

Sacred Heart, Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Conception and Augustinian Recollect Sisters.

I was also impressed with congregational leaders who supported their individual members, who having left traditional ministries, engaged in these new ministries with the marginalized. One such famous superior was Good Shepherd Sr. Mary Christine Tan, who along with being chair of these leaders in the Association of Major Religious Superiors of Women was herself a key national leader in human rights action.

Transformation was the goal, and the sisters were clear role models, though I doubt Tan or any sisters thought about themselves as such. Their influence was clear. They were highly trusted. Their lives were believable, countering prevailing characterizations of women capable of only nurture and compassion as wives and mothers, attached to men. The sisters lived those values and also valued intellectual and professional development and living their faith. Their power and passion was motivating.

The driving forces

According to Roces, three events prepared and compelled the "nun" activists forward: opportunity for study and formation overseas; Vatican II promoting movement towards the poor and marginalized; and the declaration of martial law that evolved into dictatorship. Study abroad formed the women in international perspectives and in new theologies emerging from Vatican II. Many recognized intellectuals returned to the Philippines to teach in their congregations' or other universities.

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Some of the orders' established colleges for women became platforms for women's studies and feminist theologies, even promoting new concepts to a wider audience through radio, and later, television. This offered opportunity for those unable to attend formal higher education to gain new thinking about women and God images.

The challenge of Vatican II — to move to the poor and marginalized — inspired action with marginalized women. Some of the sisters lived in village or urban communities, and others lived in their town convents but went out to work with poor women in factories or family settings. Wealthy women, seeking similar transformation, sought out opportunities to also learn new skills.

Martial law and dictatorship thrust the sisters into a new world of political activism. They experienced firsthand the injustices and oppression growing in the communities they were serving and were compelled to action, something patriarchal church authorities did not applaud. Some were threatened with excommunication. Congregations, thankfully, supported their sisters' involvement, even when arrested in protests against the government and imprisoned by military rulers. As passionate "followers of Christ," the sisters' moral power grew as they continued on.



Filipinos carry a banner during a protest in Manila Sept. 21, 2020, the 48th anniversary of martial law, imposed by the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr. (CNS/Reuters/Eloisa Lopez)

Moral power in civil matters did not translate into increased power in the church. I recall numerous conversations in which sisters lamented that even though they were more educated than most of the clergy who ruled, their expertise was ignored. Undeterred, they used their education to expand their mission internationally and launched three organizations to empower women politically and theologically to work against exploitation: Development Action for Women Network; Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians; and Gabriela, a grassroots alliance of Filipino women's organization that became transnational, focused on education and advocacy against trafficking and prostitution.

Roces' work clearly reflects pride in these sisters' contributions to Philippine women, highlighting the sisters' efforts to dismantle the religious roots of women's oppression, particularly as "martyr and suffering ideal" promoted by church and society. She noted that Good Friday had traditionally been promoted as the most revered day of the Lenten season; the ideals of "suffering" Jesus and Mary as "suffering Mother" were to be internalized. Wives were encouraged to emulate selfless suffering as their wifely, motherly vocation. The sisters' educational and advocacy work gradually demythologized this vocational image.

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Critiquing damaging structures keeping women voiceless in family and church was not appreciated by the hierarchy. Sisters' work with Scripture and theology brought accusations of desires to be priests. Not so: Being nuns had advantages, the primary one being freedom. They reached places clerics could not go. The hierarchy could not stop them from crossing societal class borders where they were welcomed or prevent them from educating women about their dignity.

But freedoms also brought threats.

Sr. Aquila Sy, a Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary that I knew personally, had to leave the country, faced with death threats for her work with rural communities. Sr. Mary John Mananzan, a Missionary Benedictine was prominent in the anti-dictatorship movement, and no doubt experienced her own threats. She also initiated the first Institute of Women's Studies in Manila. These were leaders laying down so others might flourish.

Memories of my time with these women, although many years ago now, are still vibrant; their courage and passion touched me deeply and still does. Knowing that sisters have kept following in the footsteps of those first leaders is evidence that God's Spirit was truly with them and is still strong in organizations like SAMIN. That new sisters continue to be engaged in their societies, addressing current issues of human rights abuses, labor injustice and government corruption is inspiring and hopeful for all of us.

Read this next: How I grew in political activism as a Good Shepherd Sister in the Philippines