

After 25 years' work in the Philippines, pondering blessings, needs, and wants

**Richard Mickley, CDOS
(Serving in the Philippines 1991-2016)**

It's June 2016. This month marks the 25th year since I borrowed money for an exploratory trip to the Philippines. I was here and experienced the ash-covered country from the June 1991 eruption of Mount Pinatubo.

I pause, ponder, and get pensive for a moment and jot down some memories and some reactions made particularly powerful by events of the last weekend of June 2016 (25 years after the big event of the last weekend of June.1991).

On Saturday June 25th 2016, while Hilary Clinton was marching in the Pride Parade in New York City, I participated with thousands in the 22nd anniversary Pride March at Rizal Park in Manila and was overwhelmed with emotion as I observed "wave after wave" of hundreds of LGBT supporting organizations, with thousands celebrating unity in diversity following the Orlando massacre. I was thinking so joyfully what the Filipino people had accomplished since 1991.

In 1991 I was pursuing the life-guiding career decision that I had made at age 13 – to leave my parents and 9 siblings and become a priest. In 1991 I was pastor of a thriving enthusiastic MCC church in Auckland: well staffed, highly qualified assistant pastor, two superb deacons, a hard working board of directors, and wonderful people.

A letter came from the Philippines. "I've been kicked out of my church for being gay. There is nobody here to help people like us. When is somebody going to help us?"

What did I want to do? What did I need to do?

At the end of my six week exploratory visit and networking 25 years ago, 43 people signed a petition to me and to MCC headquarters for me to set a church to help people who were "kicked out," literally or psychologically.

I accepted. MCC headquarters approved.

After 25 years I look back on my ministry in the Philippines. I ponder my blessings and what have been my needs and what have been my wants. I want most to praise and thank the wonderful people of the Philippines for the welcome and home for 25 years as I praise them for the astounding movement which has evolved and withstood great opposition, suffered defeats (as in no anti-discrimination law yet), and made great strides – with the encouragement and efforts of such agencies as the Human Rights Commission and the National

Council of Churches and the magnificent hard work of dozens of LGBTI leaders and organizations.

When I answered the call, I knew the needs of the people of Auckland could be well taken care of without me. But there was nobody else to attend to the needs of the courageous people of the Philippines. They were discriminated against spiritually (told they were not welcome in church and not eligible for heaven) and in society in general. I had lived in countries which had active gay and lesbian advocacy organizations – a whole movement which we came to call LGBTI later.

They told me they knew about Lesbian and Gay organizations in the United States, even the pride marches they have over there, but that they did not have even one openly gay and lesbian organization in the country, certainly not in Manila.

First Gay and Lesbian Pride Mass in Philippines

With the help of Jomar Fleras, the playwright, and his friends, and the other people I had met networking, we held the first openly gay and lesbian Pride Mass at the high altar of the National Cathedral of the Holy Child on Taft Avenue on June 30, 1991. A Methodist pastor and a Philippine Independent Church priest concelebrated with me, and I preached on what MCC was doing for spiritual liberation and justice around the world. 50 people attended—the last weekend of June 1991, the first publicly gay and lesbian event in the country.

MCC Manila September 7, 1991

When I set up MCC Manila a few weeks later, I told them I only needed a bowl of soup every day and a place to sleep. (But I did not need or want a salary.) Then I found out I was old enough for US Social Security. With that I was able to have a center for our weekly meetings (and survive until now).

Year after year God guided the people of the Philippines to know and accept God's love, and believe in God's unconditional love, and toss off the chains of discrimination when people tried to block them from God's love and the family of God.

I had gone through it two decades earlier. It was now not my need. For twenty years I had been working in this advocacy. It was a right and happiness I wanted to see my Filipino friends enjoy. Mainstream newspapers (and tabloids) published features about our liberating ministry.

First Pride March in Asia June 30, 1994



*Some of MCC participants.
Many were closeted in nearby trees.*



*Pride Mass and Keynote speech;
Followed by Oka reading a Manifesto.*

Eventually Edgar (Oscar, Oka) Atadero became a member of the MCC Manila Board of Directors. He was already a leader with Murphy Red and Alan Tuloso in Pro Gay which they set up in 1992. The two groups, MCC and Pro Gay, planned the first Pride March in Asia for June 30, 1994, three years after the first Pride Mass and 25 years after the movement got off to a jump start at the Stonewall riots. (That was in 1969. In June 2016 President Obama signed a proclamation making the Stonewall Inn a national historical monument.)



I forget what year it was that L-R Alan Tuloso, Murphy Red, and I were recognized for stating the first Pride March in 1994.



Fr. JP and Ryan visiting the Stonewall Inn in 2016

That was 1969, one year after Rev. Troy Perry made the groundbreaking spiritual godsend of setting up the Metropolitan Community Church in 1968 which we brought to Manila in 1991.) (See <http://thepridela.com/2016/06/pioneer-reverend-troy-perry/>) (I had the awesome privilege of working and praying with Rev. Perry for several years in his office.)



Rev. Perry in front of the globe, Pastor Mickley with Philippine flag.

Task Force Pride 1999

Through the years, I continued to ask myself what are my wants, and what are the people's needs. By 1999 a significant number of gay and lesbian organizations were serving the needs of various sectors of our community. We came together and organized Task Force Pride (TFP) which initially met at the editorial offices of *ManilaOut* in Santa Mesa where my partner and I were editing the first gay and lesbian magazine, published by Bayani Santos. After Jomar Fleras led several Pride Marches, in 1999 TFP organized the annual Pride March which TFP has continued to do.

Through the ensuing years I served with 30 or more of the most dedicated, talented, and effective activist friends in building the LGBTI movement of the Philippines. I hesitate to mention names because all were fabulous friends -- the originals in TFP Danton Remoto, Malou Marin, Ging Crystobal, Ann Lim, Giney Villar, Eva Callueng (and others from Babaylan), Blu, Bruce, Angie and so many others.

Retirement from MCC

When I was well past the retirement age for pastors indicated in the MCC bylaws, I was reminded that the bylaws also require indigenous pastors in all countries.

Order of St. Aelred and Gay Men's Support Group

A priest friend introduced me to St. Aelred and his passionate advocacy of friendship. I did not want to set up a parish church in "competition" with MCC. A little community of us, the Order of St. Aelred, began to study and admire the writings of St. Aelred on friendship. "If God is love, God is friendship."

Out of that grew the Gay Men's Support Group (GMSG). Twenty or more men came together every Friday night for more than ten years, hundreds experiencing mutual support, encouragement, and friendship.

And that's what we did. It was always about our lives, living our lives in full bloom, overcoming the limitations of prejudice, and becoming what we choose to become and sharing the joy of it all in friendship with each other on Friday nights – sharing our feelings, mad, sad, glad, or scared, and supporting each other toward fulfillment of life's dreams. The men of GMSG were a life-changing inspiration for me.

Holy Union Weddings in the Philippines

When I came to Manila, I found many committed same-sex couples sadly disappointed because they had no opportunity to express their vows in a commitment ceremony like their siblings could do. I had been officiating at the MCC rite of Holy Union for 20 years in other countries. So, when Mary Lou and Chris asked me to officiate a wedding for them, I introduced Holy Union as the first step toward marriage equality in the country.

Everything can be the same – same love, same vows, same commitment, same wedding – except that “marriage” is a government-licensed event in all countries. Obviously, the only country in the world which does not allow its citizens the right of legal separation in divorce from a marriage that didn't work out would not in contrast allow same-sex love to be honored in equal marriage. I offered the sacrament of Holy Union for the joy and satisfaction of those couples who asked for it without requiring any charge or fee.



A still photo at the wedding of Nil, the transman, and Nilz Wife.



Procession into a fabulous wedding



A fabulous wedding of two fabulous guys, Pao and Rhex in Tagaytay



The Holy Union of two good friends, Louie and Gary.



Equal marriage denied; love can never be stifled.

Bishop James Burch and Catholic Dioceses of One Spirit

After my retirement from MCC, I met another awesome founder, Bishop James Burch, who invited me to serve as a priest and then as a bishop in the Catholic Dioceses of One Spirit, with the inspiring charism that we strive to do and teach as Jesus did in the gospels, striving to pray as Jesus taught and did, to love as Jesus taught and did, and to serve as Jesus taught and did.

<http://www.onespiritcatholic.org>



Shown together here after Bishop Burch officiated a same-sex wedding in a park near the Capitol in Washington, DC.

Again I pondered: is my living this charism something I want or something I need? I realized that my fulfillment as a person, as a priest, was my heartfelt need to pray, to love, and to serve, and furthermore to want with all my being to live this charism. It was never about bigger. It was always about better – a better life for ourselves, for those who came to us with needs.

Among the great and overwhelming gifts I have experienced here is a truly authentic community of prayer, friendship, and service of dedicated servant friend priests, pastors, deacons, and lay members, including Fr. James Rodgers up in La Union in northern Luzon in addition to Fr. JP (world-wide) and Fr. Regen Luna in Dasmariñas and those in the Manila area.



One of my great spiritual joys in my quarter century Pinoy service was the ordination of Fr. Regen Luna as a Catholic priest in the Catholic Dioceses of One Spirit.



Fr. JP joined me in the ordination of deacons at ECOG Dasmaringas



Pride Marches in the Philippines

Year after year I have often marched in the annual Pride March with our long time dedicated pastor, Fr. Regen Luna and his wonderful community in the Church of God at Dasmarias. Sometimes I marched with the MCC's. Sometimes we had marching and float contingents for the Order of St. Aelred.

Always, along the way, I was greeted by long-time friends, Dra. Margie Holmes and Dr. Neil Garcia.



With my long-time friend, Prof Neil Garcia of UP and UP Babaylan



My long-time friend, Margie Holmes and husband, Jeremy, with me and Regen



With Fr. Regen Luna and the Church of God (COG), Catholic Diocese of One Spirit



The Order of St. Aelred and CSSS marching in the annual Pride March

One year Myke and Egay and I were invited to begin the march with prayer.





Marching with Pastor Egay (Makati) and Pastor Kakay (QC) and the MCC's



For the twentieth anniversary Pride March, Task Force Pride asked me to ride in the lead “float.”



Margie Holmes presenting me a “historic figure” plaque at QC Pride March, with Fr. Regen alongside.

A few noted activities

I participated in meetings, seminars, dialogs with leaders of the LGBTI community regularly over the years often with Fr. Regen and our Deacon Ryan Mendoza, HIV/AIDS coordinator for the National Council of Churches of the Philippines.



Many leaders of LGBTI community discussing “faith and equality.” Also present, the CBCP priest (lower, second from right R) in charge of their AIDS ministry reminded us of our sinfulness. Our Fr. Regen and Ryan behind me in photo (in blue and green shirts).

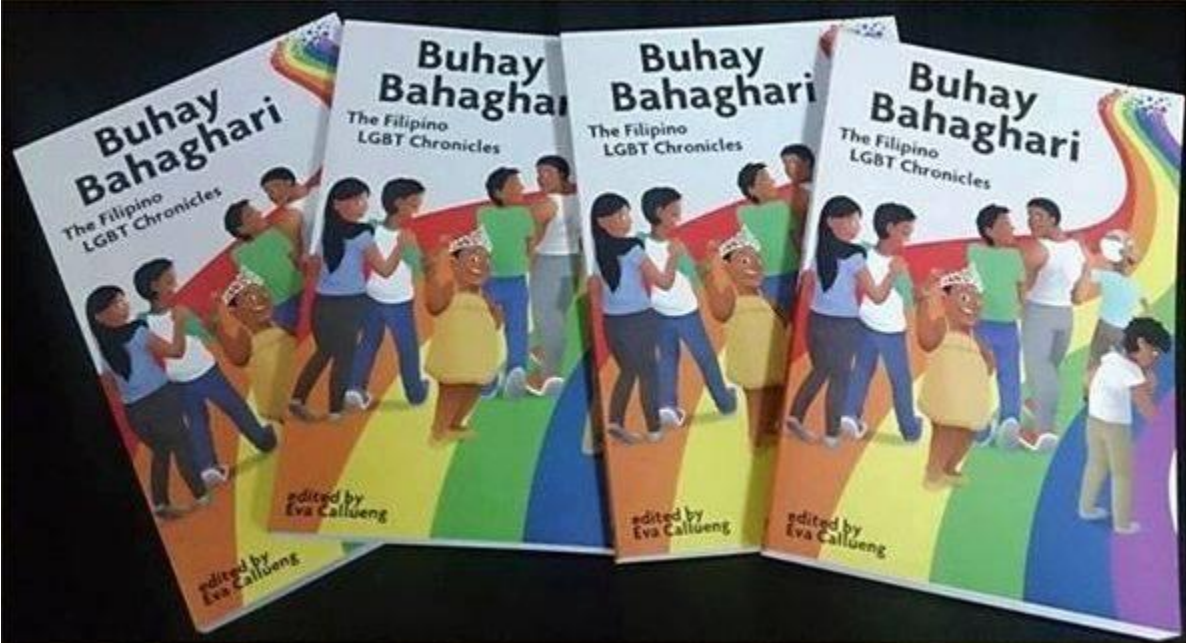


Speaking at a Forum

I was honored to have an essay on the LGBTI movement in the Philippines, edited by Eva Callueng, published by the University of the Philippines.



The Launching of Buhay Bahaghari at UP



Services of mourning and committal

Often I have been called upon for wake and memorial and funeral services by friends in the community.



This photo is taken at the committal service for the Mother of my friend, George DiCarlo and Ryan Reyes.

Spiritual joy in Prayer Partnership with Argel Tuason

I am sustained in a special way by my inspiring prayer partner and soul mate of more than seven years, Argel Tuason, who ever brings me back to the joyful contemplation of the practice of the presence of God in the spirit of Celtic Spirituality.



A moment of serious reflection with Argel



With Argel near the EDSA Central

chapel where we frequently pray

While I urge my friends in our community to serve God by carrying out the duties of our state of life, I likewise strive to do so in my ministry, in my fabulous long term loving relationship, in our community, and in my works of service for PLHIV and wherever I am needed.

2013 COSE, among Ten Outstanding Elderly of the Philippines

I was very surprised when, on the nomination of Patrick Bonales, I was selected as one of the Ten Outstanding Elderly Persons of the Philippines for the year 2013. I had been honored by Gay and Lesbian organizations, and I was humbled by that. But COSE was an organization which selects people from every walk of life for this annual recognition.



Ten Outstanding Elderly of the Philippines with trophies from COSE

Fr. JP brings spirit and joy to CDOS Philippines

Indeed another insurmountable gift for the ministry here is the prayer, love, and service of Fr. JP (Johannes Paulus) Heath, originally from South Africa, a priest-servant member of our community, and a world-wide advocate for every facet of ministry and service and social acceptance of PLHIV. Even as I write, Fr. JP is in New York pleading to the United Nations



©Laurel Sprague

for adequate care and attention for the PLHIV of the world.
God's gift to the Philippines, Fr. JP has been elected bishop of the CDOS diocese of the Philippines as I round out my quarter century service here.



With Fr. JP at the National Council of Churches at the conclusion of the SAVE Toolkit Seminar I attended. (JP developed SAVE, and it is now a world-wide ministry particularly for training church people in the all-around aspects of HIV prevention and testing including elimination of stigma.) In addition he is the founder of Inerella, a world-wide, 40,000 strong, network of priests and ministers

who are PLHIV. (In front row, 2nd from left, I Deacon Mark Lester Rodriquez, one of our senior CDOS servant leaders in The Well wellness program.

A personal note

God has granted me an incredible life of spiritual, intellectual, and physical blessings and privileges in his service. I did Tai Chi unfailingly the first four years of my 80's and did yoga on my 87th birthday.



Tai Chi in the park with Senior Citizens of Pasig Barangay Kapitolyo and Teacher Tely.

Indeed, my spiritual wants and needs have been fulfilled, but I am sad that my calling (on the advice of priest superiors) to be a father and have a family was a want and need I did not adequately fulfill as I was less than the wonderful father I would want to be to my astounding three daughters, five sons, (continued after photos)



With son, Coach Rick, in 2014



Richard and Nancy and 8 children in 1968



The photo just above was sent to me in the Philippines by our children's outstanding mother before she died a couple of years ago. Now our children have partners and are the parents of our growing number of fabulous grandchildren and great grandchildren.

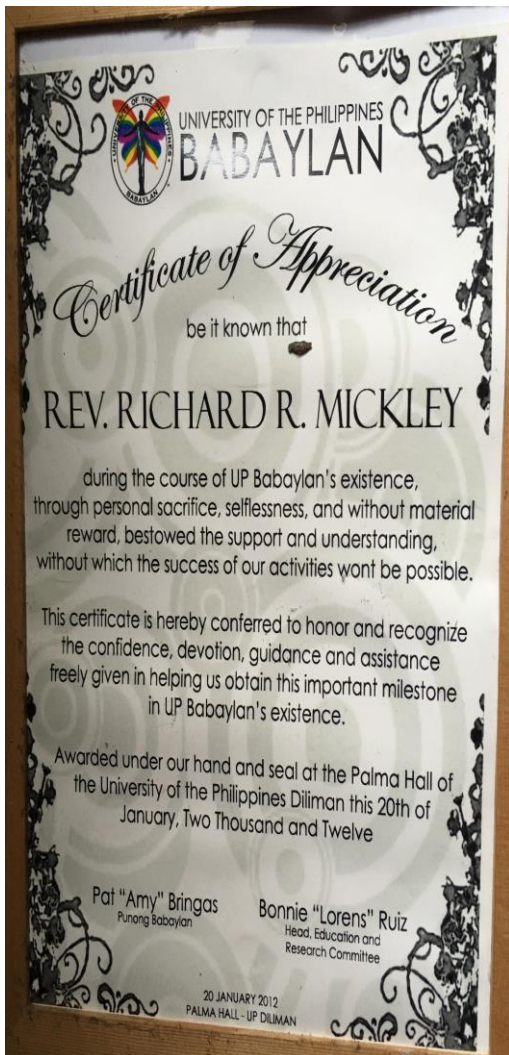
wonderful grandchildren, and incredibly beautiful twin great granddaughters, living in Michigan, but whom I see every day on Facebook, thanks to their mother, my dear granddaughter Melissa.



UP Babylan

As my years draw to a close, I observe 25 years of serving the needs of the people in the Philippines (who summoned me 25 years ago this month, “There is no one here helping us.”)

I first taught seminars on sexuality (justice and equality) for UP Babaylan in 1994, two years after they started in 1992, followed by numerous workshops and discussions over the years. In 2012 these outstanding adult student LGBTI activists, with their intrepid advisor Prof Neil Garcia, made my heart beat fast with emotion as they awarded me a certificate of appreciation, after Argel Tuason and I conducted a training on sex-positive thinking.



Working with wonderful leaders for 25 years

It was a joy to work with so many leaders in the movement which quickly evolved from our humble beginnings in 1991.

In addition, it was a blessing to see so many dedicated mature Christian friends come together in the spiritual freedom of their heartfelt love for God and the Gospel in one MCC after another.



Celebrating 21 years after MCC Manila was started with MCC leaders Egay, John, Jason, Art. Pastor Kakay and Pastor Myke were not present at this service.



With MCC Makati on the occasion of the ordination visit of Elder Darlene Garner, seated next to me. Argel's partner, Ronnel, is seated second lower right.

<https://web.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=178348059164290&set=t.614687843&type=3&theater>

HIV, AIDS, Recovery Ministry

For 20 years from 1971 to 1991, I had been in ministry to the LGBTI people in three countries. In the early 1980's I joined Bishop Stan Harris in Los Angeles in the Missionaries of Mercy with whom we brought what help we could to one after another gay man who was coming down with a new unnamed disease, often bedridden, and too often, dying, while the scientific community studied how to conquer it. They basically had no medicine. All we could do was personal chores, from house cleaning to errands, to make them as comfortable as possible. In 1983 the virus HIV was identified and medicines started to be developed. I continued doing everything I could to make life better for PLHIV in LA, Auckland, and Manila.

I had had the great good fortune of going to rehab in 1971 for recovery from my own misuse of alcohol. I learned the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous directly from the author of the Twelve Steps. Thereafter I was able to work with addicts (alcohol, drugs, sex, work, gambling, etc.) who were seeking recovery.

The Ministry of The Well wellness program

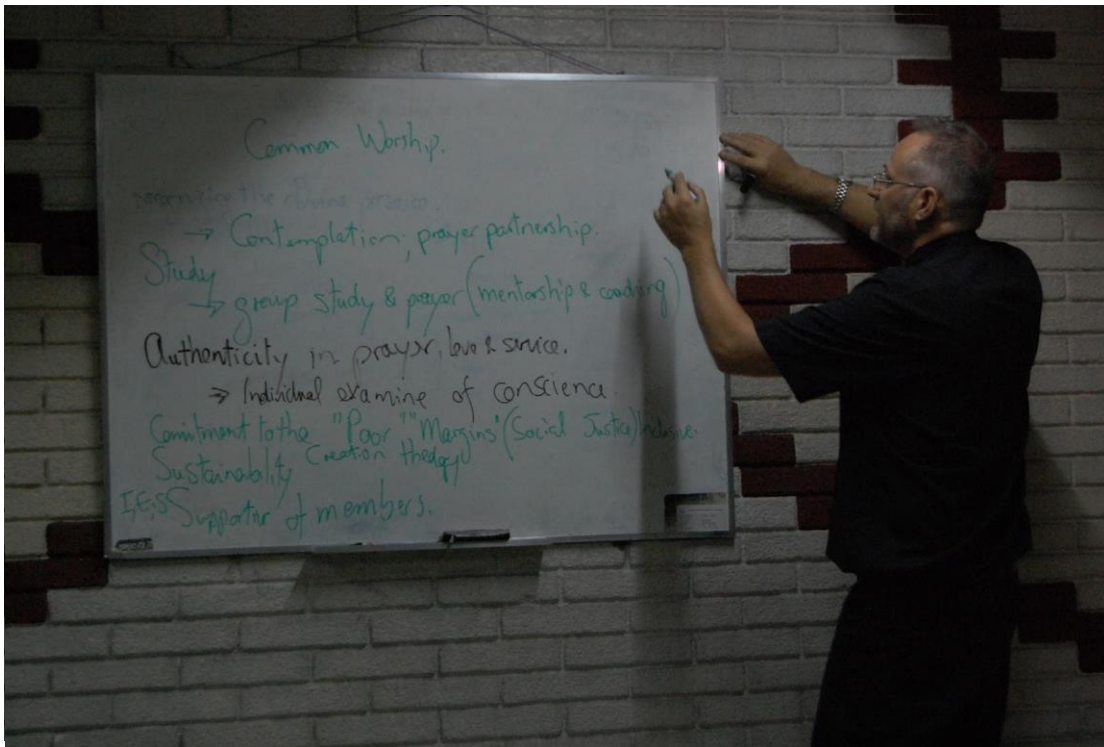
Perhaps the pinnacle of work satisfaction came after Argel and I prayed for two years to know God's will for our work of service. (To pray, to love, to serve.) God led us to open The Well wellness program for wholistic approaches to serving.

We were called to provide programs of service in wellness for PLHIV and for addicts seeking recovery and for relationship enhancement for LGBTI people in committed relationships who intently yearned for the best relationship they could have.



Some of the leaders and dedicated team members in the works of healing and service, HIV ministry, internalized homophobia, addiction, etc. after Fr. JP led us

in leadership training. L-R Ryan. JP, me, Van, Argel (behind), and in front, Pete and Mark.



In

JP Teaching -- which we appreciate so much

World Council of Churches

In October 2014, through the positions JP holds at the WCC, I was flown to Geneva to tell HIV and AIDS ministers and priests from around the globe (continued after photos)





***On Saturday after the world-wide colloquium in Geneva on HIV/AIDS ministry, JP guided us on a tourist excursion around the Alps Mountains.
R -- me, Fr. JP, Ryan Mendoza of CDOS Manila, The Well, and NCCP Philippines.***

at the World Council of Churches about the healing and wellness program of The Well offered by our wonderful team of dedicated servant leader friends. It is indeed an overwhelming feeling of wonder and joy to see people take charge of their personal wellness and live happy fulfilled lives. Fr. JP is a leader in the WCC HIV and AIDS Ministry network, and I was privileged to join him and Ryan for the annual Colloquium and tell the world about the healing ministry of The Well.

Indeed it was a marvelous experience for me to be with such dedicated priests and ministers from around the world at the Colloquium.

AND an anonymous donor (discovered by JP) made it possible for me to visit Bishop Burch and my family in the United States (but that is another wonderful story).



In 2014 with two of my younger brothers, Lon (left) and Jim in Ohio

Therefore, in conclusion,

The last weekend of June 2016 brought back fond recollections of the good people of the Philippines who reached out in 1991 beseeching, “who will help people like us? Kicked out”

I knew they had found the answer when I saw the impressive wonderful awardees of the Bahaghari Media Awards at the Diamond Hotel on Friday evening, June 24th at the gala awards event sponsored by the lawyers of Rainbow Rights (with long-time activist Angie Umbac) and the editors (Michel Tan and Ryan

Mendoza) of the country's outstanding LGBTI Magazine, *Outrage*, with encouragement and financial support from the US Embassy. Now even a big significant portion of the media are our defenders, promoters. Awardees are (wow) :

"The Bahaghari Media Awards spotlights media heroes who provide an inclusive, equal and non-discriminatory platform for reporting on LGBTQIA issues, and who – against the odds – continue to inspire others in their profession to positively feature the diversity of the LGBTQIA community," said Angie Umbac of R-Rights. "It is high time for us to celebrate the advancements and best practices in media reporting that will go a long way in shaping societal norms, and ending violence and discrimination committed against LGBT Filipinos."

"Given recognition were: **Cheche Lazaro; Dr. Margarita Go-Singco Holmes; Lea Salonga; Jessica Soho; Prof. Solita "Winnie" Monsod; Maria Salvacion "Inday" Espina Varona-Mendiola; Sylvia Estrada Claudio, M.D., Ph.D., Karen Davila; Vicky Morales; Kara David;** and radio program **Psych O'clock Habit** (Jay Yacat, Apryl Mae Parcon, Eric Julian Manalastas and Jose Antonio Clemente).

"Bahaghari Media Awards winners are selected based on their inclusive representation/s of the diversity of the LGBTQIA community in the reporting; daring, originality and consistency in pushing for LGBTQIA rights in the Philippines; and the impact – perceived or actual – of their media-related effort/s in the promotion of LGBTQIA rights in the Philippines." **Outrage**
<http://outragemag.com/>

In 1991, Margie Holmes was already championing our right to be who we are, but since then she has gained a fantastic backup.

And now-- On June 25th 2016, when I saw with my own eyes and heard with my own ears slogans by the hundreds, the songs, shouts, cheers, and drums and bands coming from thousands





and thousands in Rizal Park at the 22nd anniversary of our first Pride March – I knew for absolute certainty the Pinoy LGBTI community was no longer asking “who will help us?”

They are magnificently helping themselves and my heart is filled with joy. Maybe I kicked the ball to start the game, but they are playing out the game of full life and liberty in a proud and extraordinarily great way.

I thank God for the wonderful, faithful friends who have contributed more happiness than I deserve in my quarter century serving in this land of Jose Rizal whom I came to know and idolize through extensive study. I don't crave to be shot as he was and have a park and thousands of places named after me, but , Oh to be like him in his wisdom and integrity!



My dear friends Rev. Myke Sotero (r) and his partner Gregory (Jojo) of MCC Baguio always such loving supportive friends

I had the privilege of participating in ordaining Myke as a priest in Baguio in 2015, another outstanding Pinoy LGBTI leader.



At 88, if this were my swan song, maybe it would say something like Jim Paredes said today in the *Philippine Star*, 'We will die, but some part of us must live on. We must live a life that defies our own death, and leave behind something that people can enjoy, emulate, be grateful for or be inspired by.' With regard to our three daughters and five sons, that fits Nancy beautifully. I pray that in some way

it applies to me as the ball kicker for the start of the LGBTI movement in the Philippines.

Conclusion

As I was writing on Philippine Independence Day 2016, I was confronted with a newspaper ad for a job fair: “Does the job match the heights of your passion?”

I answer: A resounding “YES.” I thank God for the call to the Philippines, for the uplifting, inspiring people, friends, in this fantastic country.

Joyfully I say every day, “Pilipino na ako; Pilipinas kong mahal.”