

## **FR. RHOEL D. GALLARDO, CMF**

The island of Basilan has a long history of unrest and terrorism. A number of priests, religious and lay people have been kidnapped in the past. On February 14, 1999, a group of five catechists from San Vicente Parish in Tumahubong was ambushed on their way to attend the Prelature's Lenten recollection. It will be in this dangerous place where Fr. Rhoel D. Gallardo, CMF, a 34 year-old missionary who is barely six years into priesthood, will have his missionary assignment as pastor of the same parish and as director of Claret School of Tumahubong.

Threats against the peace and security in the small community of Tumahubong had been circulating prior to that unforgettable day of kidnapping that would lead to the sufferings of many and the loss of lives of few. It was on the morning of March 20, 2000, when a group of heavily armed members of the terrorist group Abu Sayyaf stormed Claret School of Tumahubong, Basilan and three other public schools in the area, taking as hostages students, teachers and Fr. Rhoel D. Gallardo, CMF. They were brought to the Abu Sayyaf's Camp Abdurazzak in the mountains of Sumisip, Basilan, walking and running for eight hours until they reached the place.

In those 43 days of ordeal, Fr. Rhoel stood his ground as a good shepherd to his fellow captives, imploring them to hold fast to their faith amidst the brainwashing of the Abu Sayyaf. A day after their captivity, Fr. Rhoel was called by the leader of the Abu Sayyaf for an interrogation. The interview, which lasted for almost three hours, was mostly the leader talking about Islam. Among the demands of the group was the removal of the crosses in Basilan.

Because of Fr. Rhoel's constant inquiry into the status of other captives, especially the female teacher who disappeared for several days, he was given "disciplinary action." Fr. Rhoel was taken out of the prison cell, handcuffed and mauled by four members of Abu Sayyaf. His hands were handcuffed. He was bloodied and his face swollen.

Fr. Rhoel was also punished for leading his companions in praying the rosary aloud. The Muslim extremists commanded them to shut up or else they would kill the priest and the rest of the male hostages. So as not to antagonize their captors, Fr. Rhoel suggested that they pray softly. He was so concerned about the welfare of the children and others. All throughout their ordeal, Fr. Rhoel was a source of strength and encouragement, never complaining about the food or the difficulty of their situation.

On April 28, a week after the military started their offense, the Abu Sayyaf left the camp together with the rest of the captives to escape the military attacks. On their way down, a rope was tied around his waist and he carried the barrel of the 50-caliber machinegun. Fr. Rhoel was in the front line. In the next five days, the hostages experienced extreme hardship.

The last ordeal happened in the afternoon of May 3. Burst of gun fires started on both sides of the military and the Abu Sayyaf. Fr. Rhoel who was handtied with another hostage, suffered three gunshot wounds in his head, shoulder and back. Investigators and forensic doctors confirmed that he was tortured before he was killed and the nails on his toes removed two to three days before he was shot at close range.

### *Looking back...*

Fr. Rhoel's missionary stint in Basilan was short, but those days spent as shepherd of Tumahubong were a realization of a dream as a Claretian missionary. What he wrote in his application for the perpetual profession expressed his desire to be a Claretian missionary till death and how he valued Basilan. He said: "My pastoral immersion in Basilan last year made me experience concretely our witnessing and evangelizing life and mission to the poor (as well as) our community's presence in the dialogue of life and faith with our Muslim brothers and sisters. These experiences have become a real challenge to me to be a committed missionary and active witness to God's liberating love for humanity...conscious that our life and mission demand a total giving of ourselves for the greater glory of God and the salvation of humankind."

When the time came for him to totally give himself up following the demands of Claretian life and mission, Fr. Rhoel did not leave his flock and chose to be at the side of those who suffered. The prayer that he has written before, "O Lord conquer my fears with faith and trust in you", must be the grace that sustained him. Mr. Reynaldo Rubio, the school principal who was with Fr. Rhoel, during the captivity, noticed how the missionary had had a prayer moment of his life in those weeks at Punoh Muhadji. He attested: "Most of the time, he prayed alone and fervently. We did not hear Fr. Rhoel complained. At times he skipped his meals. We slept side by side. He seemed optimistic that everything would be alright in spite of the tense situation." As a close companion of Fr. Rhoel in those days of captivity. Mr. Rubio has the conviction that Fr. Rhoel died with a mission and with a cause, a man of few words and dedicated to his missionary work.

The life and martyrdom of Fr. Rhoel is a testament of a true son of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, embracing sacrifices and rejoicing in torments. He is an inspiration to faithfully and joyfully live our missionary life. That year of his martyrdom, in the year of Jubilee 2000, the Superior General of the Claretian Congregation, Fr. Aquilino Bocos Merino, CMF, gave an inspiring message to his brother Claretians in the Philippines. He said: “Rhoel’s testimony is the lamp that has to be kept alive with the fire of charity and love for the people and the Church in Basilan. Rhoel reminds us with his death that the kingdom of God suffers violence and that only those with courage can cooperate in its growth.”