

Fr. Rhoel Gallardo, CMF and the Peace and Reconciliation Ministry in Basilan

Fr. Rhoel Gallardo, CMF, was assigned to the San Vicente Ferrer Parish of Tumahubong, one of the ten parishes of the Prelature of Isabela. He, along with teachers and students of Claret School of Tumahubong, was kidnapped by the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) on March 20, 2000. According to the survivors of the kidnapping, Fr. Rhoel remained calm despite the physical and verbal abuses he suffered from the kidnappers. He protected his companions from different forms of abuses – physical, psychological, spiritual, and even sexual – and provided them spiritual support and encouragement so that they would remain steadfast in their Catholic faith.

Tumahubong is one of the municipalities of Basilan, an island province in the southwestern part of the Philippines and located at the tip of Zamboanga Peninsula. It is a Muslim-dominated province, with Christians comprising a measly 27% of the total population. The San Vicente Ferrer parish had always been considered a difficult mission area due to problems of accessibility, poverty, and security caused by extremist groups.

The late Bp. José Ma. Querexeta, CMF, DD oriented his service towards the creation of socio-economic opportunities for the marginalized and the upliftment of their quality of life, regardless of their religion and ethnic background. These endeavors gave life to the tenets of “preferential option for the poor” and “action in behalf of justice” in Basilan. The late bishop’s initiatives became the foundation upon which the pastoral priorities of the local Church towards building Christian communities and promoting dialogue, peace and reconciliation, and human development were built and fortified. Interculturality had been an integral part of the local Church with dialogue and peace-building consistently being the bedrocks of evangelization in the prelature.

It was against this backdrop that Fr. Gallardo endeavored to live a life consistent with the pastoral priorities of the local Church even in the face of suffering and death. He was a man of peace and reconciliation to his captors and to his fellow kidnap victims. Even in captivity and amidst his own suffering, Fr. Gallardo was mindful and prayed fervently for the mitigation of the tension between Christians and Muslims that the kidnapping might have kindled.

Fr. Gallardo and three teachers were killed in a military rescue operation on May 3, 2000. In May 2021, the Claretian missionaries opened a cause for Fr. Gallardo’s beatification as a martyr of faith.

Bp. Leo M. Dalmao, CMF, DD
Bishop-Prelate
Prelature of Isabela, Basilan