

# Belgian Nuns and Jacques Nasser: Molded and Mentored

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When I was promoting outsourcing in the Philippines during my PLDT days, one of the questions asked of me was why products of St. Theresa's College (STC) speak English not just with punctilious observance of grammar but with such a wide vocabulary.

That set me thinking in 2002, when we were starting the PLDT outsourcing Call Center business (Vocative/Parlance which subsequently morphed into Ventus), as to why Theresians were obsessed with English.

My response was, blame it on the Belgian nuns who taught us how to speak English. When I was in STC, we had English grammar, English vocabulary building, English reading and comprehension followed by English composition.

English—make that the Queen's English—was a way of life. . If we spoke in Filipino, we were fined. But did that not make us less patriotic? Not at all. The same Belgian nuns taught us Philippine history, then labeled Social Studies; love of country; and most importantly love of the poor. At age 14, the *Rerum Novarum* of Pope Leo XIII (1891) was required reading. At that age social justice and how the poor were entitled to a life of dignity were already being ingrained in my system. *Rerum Novarum* was followed by Pope Pius XI's *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) and Pope John Paul XXIII's *Mater et Magistra* (1961). I was in second year high school in St. Theresa's Manila at the time. The Belgian nuns knew how to make us read what to my mind were probably the most boring papal encyclicals, but I had no choice.

Apart from reading, the Belgian nuns made sure we put into practice the virtue of concern for others. Every Saturday, we had to come to school and spend the whole morning either visiting families in Looban, or the orphans in the Settlement House, or patients in the Philippine General Hospital (PGH). It was part of our social

consciousness/awareness program.

In addition, everything else we did had to be done with a passion for excellence. Yes, the Belgian nuns antedated Tom Peters. I almost suspect he lifted his ideas from them. They always talked about the parable of the talents and how on judgment day, God would call you and ask what you did with your gifts.

Sixteen years of STC education under the Belgian nuns molded me. When I look back on how I have come to be who and what I am today, I have to give credit to the curriculum and the training they had put together. This ranged from the sublime—Art/Music classes, History and Literature covering the gamut of European, Asian and American—to the mundane or what would turn us into good housewives such as sewing/embroidery/knitting/crocheting/cooking and most especially good manners and right conduct. Until today, and I plead every bias, no one can approximate the education that I received from them.

Our teachers were young, European nuns from very good families who had joined the convent to proselytize the good tidings of Sister Louise De Meester, a serious-looking nun in a sepia photo that I would stare at when we were in grade school, while preparing for the Golden Jubilee of the ICM Missionaries (what we used to call the I Collect Money Sisters in mock horror). The curriculum they had put together aimed to make us good Catholic girls who would make excellent Catholic wives, BUT with one exception—they wanted us to be very smart, thirsty learners, independent, self-assured women with a passion for excellence; to put our whole heart and soul into everything we do.

We were also urged to at all times “Let Your Light Shine!” That was the culture woven into our school song which challenged us to be the “greatest and the best” at a time when it was not yet considered politically incorrect to do so. One of our nuns, Sr. Hilde (a.k.a. Pat Boone as she was a dead ringer) enjoined us to be ourselves at all times and in being ourselves to always be the best, so Roger Federer-like (which explains the deep admiration I have for this great tennis player). A quote from Seneca, the Roman philosopher cited by Sr. Hilde, summed it all up thus, which I here paraphrase: “Diligence is a good resort and a fallback of the mediocre. So at least be diligent.”

Neatly engraved in our school badge, which was the centerpiece of our blue butterfly-like ribbon, were the Latin words *Floreat, Artibus,*

Scientia. In summary, the motto declared that we flourish thru the arts and science with a good grounding in history/literature, home economics, and sports. We were supposed to emulate our patroness, St. Theresa of Avila, a mystic and the first woman doctor of the Church who despite her deep theological thought found the time to concoct the recipe for famous Yemas. Now that was a complete Woman of her times.

Academic excellence, steeped in social justice with love of country, were ingrained in us. Here germinated the Six Sigma orientation which I would embrace so passionately in my future career with Citibank and then my PLDT outsourcing days, allowing us to compete against U.S.-owned outsourcers on even footing.

Years later, one of my mentors, Sr. Nieves, said, "Perhaps we succeeded in making you girls too smart and too independent for many of your husbands. It takes a strong self-assured man to put up with you girls."

When I started working, the words of the Belgian nuns were my mantra. While I was supposed to have been a teacher, after all I did major in History with a minor in English, I ended up in the corporate world, for which I had received no academic training whatsoever. All I had was a grim determination and a curious mind with this devil-may-care-attitude that I can learn anything, just give me a chance.

The secondary mentor who appreciated this in me was Jacques (Jac) Nasser. We were both in our mid-twenties then. I was secretary to the President of Ford Philippines while Jac had just accepted the position of Finance Director for the same company. While waiting to see the President, John Sagovac, Jac would chat with me about a myriad things. He was surprised at how up-to-date I was on global affairs, my command of the English language, and my sanguine attitude about life.

After a year of chit chat and banter, Jac offered to promote me to pricing analyst at the Finance Department of Ford Philippines. My initial reaction was one of horror quickly followed by trepidation. How could I possibly move to Finance when I had zero units in Accounting or Economics, and nearly flunked my math classes in grade school?

He and John Sagovac talked to me to convince me to take the job as it would be an opportunity that may not come again. I remember John Sagovac asking me a simple question—are you a smart broad or a dumb broad? Quickly I indignantly replied that I was a smart broad,

after all I had graduated Magna Cum Laude and Class Valedictorian from STC. Then he said, “Take it. It might not come your way again.” I turned to Jac Nasser and asked—what if I fail? Then he said, “you can always go back to being a secretary. Nothing will stop you from doing that. And why is failure in your radar screen when you’ve been pretty good at what you’ve been doing since University?” I countered that I didn’t understand a thing about Financial Analysis, much less pricing. Since I didn’t listen in grade school, I couldn’t even figure out how to get percentages! They confounded me all throughout the IQ tests I would take. It is still so vivid in my mind today how Jac looked at me and said, “Rose, Finance isn’t rocket science. It isn’t science at all. It is all about massaging the numbers to support the story you want to weave. That’s why the theme song of Finance is the Billy Joel song, ‘Honesty is Such a Lonely Word.’ You can do it. We think you would be very good at it. We know you and what you are capable of.”

With that, I decided to accept the job. It was sheer hell for the first six months as I had to understand what profit and pricing analysis was all about in a male-chauvinist automotive environment. We were all of two girls in that group which at the time was huge because it was prior to the advent of large scale automation. Day in and day out, I slugged it out taking notes, asking questions when I didn’t understand what they were talking about, without worrying about how or what people would say about me. Over time, I gained subject matter mastery to the point that after one Pricing Proposal Review, Jac Nasser said to me “not bad for a former secretary, not bad at all.”

I never looked back from there. After Finance, I moved to Sales and Marketing of Ford Philippines, which unfortunately was a short-lived assignment as Ninoy Aquino’s assassination in August 1983 and the subsequent foreign debt crisis resulted in the country running out of dollars for importation of car parts for assembly, thereby forcing the closure of the company.

But I was lucky to get a break with Citibank where I had the opportunity to move from one functional area to another. My career in management really took off from there.

Citibank was the major achievement of my career on a professional level because I learned so much as the senior management so generously trained and invested in me. PLDT was the most satisfying on a different level, a chance to create a new company to compete

against global competitors in outsourcing to prove that a 100 percent Filipino-owned company could match and even better U.S. outsourcers because we were determined to prove that the Philippines was IT for voice outsourcing. MVP (Manny V. Pangilinan) gave me a clean slate to work on and allowed my imagineering skills to fly unfettered.

Today, I am with Makati Medical Center as President & CEO. I have traversed five industries that are completely unrelated – automotive/banking/telecoms/outsourcing/healthcare. And in these industries, I have done Clerical/PR/Finance/Advertising/Sales and Marketing/Operations/ Distribution/Training/Service Quality/Facilities/General Management. What gave me the courage to shift out of my comfort zone was really the fact that someone of Jac Nasser's caliber believed in me when even I didn't believe in myself, and of course, the CORE VALUES imbibed from Sixteen Years of training by the Belgian nuns. They honed in us this incredible ethic of hard work coupled with perseverance, and once successful to always remember the poor who God must love so much because he made so many of them.

Ah, I can still picture Sr. Alphonsia every Monday morning lining us up to for us to drop our donation from our small allowances in the Mission box. Sr. Alphonsia who was about 6 ft. tall would admonish us, "Girls, dig deeper into your pockets. Girls; give to Jesus till it hurts." And hurt it did because it meant giving up many a coke bottle during the week. But it molded us into being compassionate young women which I know I have been in all the companies I have worked for. The lessons of Pope Leo XIII, which were Greek to a fourteen year old at the time, did bear fruit.



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