

Roque J. Ferriols, S.J., *Sulyap sa Aking Pinanggalingan*. Ed. Leovino Ma. Garcia, (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2016), 179 pp.

Fr. Roque J. Ferriols, S.J. retired from teaching a few years ago. When he heard from a fellow Jesuit that there was a need for the younger Jesuits to hear stories about their predecessors, he saw himself as the man for the job. *Sulyap sa Aking Pinanggalingan* is intended as the first of three books wherein Fr. Ferriols shares his memoirs. It begins with his entry into the Jesuit Novitiate on 30 May 1941, a few months before the attack on Pearl Harbor and the Japanese occupation of the Philippines, and ends in 1945 as Manila rises from the ashes of the Second World War. As the title suggests, each chapter is a glimpse chronicling the experiences he had in those years. Anyone who has spent time in the classroom with him will remember the same old Fr. Ferriols, where every class session was an act of philosophical rumination (*pagmumuni-muni*). Thus, each chapter is an invitation to listen and to join the author, as he talks about mortality, literature, education, spirituality, the horrors of war, the meaning of civilization, friendship, fidelity, patriotism, humanity, and the presence of Jesus amidst the noise of artillery, the plight of refugees, and even in the face of a Japanese soldier.

The book begins with an immediate insight into human mortality with the burial of Gusting, the author's childhood

friend. He admits the difficulty for human beings to face death, but he is nevertheless thankful that due to their consciousness, humans can encounter the universe and reflect. He follows this up with a dedication of the book to Gusting and other friends, especially the caregivers to whom he dictated the book for transcription.

As Fr. Ferriols recounts his first months in the novitiate when he went through the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, he gives his readers his own insights on what it really means to be a Jesuit, and why one would wish to live the rest of his life as a Jesuit. He vividly shares his passion to be with Christ, and to be willing to surrender all to His will.

But this seeming romanticism is immediately replaced by the horrors of war. As he shares his experiences of the Japanese invasion, he invites the reader to ruminate on the human condition and the meaning of human civilization. Without being judgmental nor preachy, he describes his experiences and helps the reader enter his memory with his own feelings. Even while he was safely studying at the novitiate during the war, he wondered about the people in London who were probably carrying on under the yoke of war, as he read a poem about the cramped streets of the said city. He recounts the women and children seeking refuge in Sta. Ana with the children in much need of medical attention. He recalls the face of a dead Japanese soldier that haunts him to this day, with the reminder that the Japanese are human beings too. He narrates the days he spent with his fellow

novices burying the dead. As he does this, Fr. Ferriols balances it with the lighter side of these realities. He recounts the story of the brother who was caught in the shower and held up momentarily by a Japanese soldier, but was allowed to carry on, while slighting the hem of his bathrobe. He tells another about the brother who became headmaster of the Ateneo Grade School, but at the time was worried about stepping on manure after an entire day spent with corpses and decaying flesh.

Fr. Ferriols documents the greatness of the Jesuits that came before him. Among many others, he names his idol Fr. Banayad, Fr. Mulry, the one who taught him how to think and to believe in his capacity to help other people think, Fr. Kerr, the one who led him to appreciate the ancient Greeks, and Fr. De La Costa, the one who opened his eyes to the world of the poets that inhabit every language. The text tells us about the heroism and bravery of these Jesuits: Fr. Hurley protected the novitiate from being claimed by the Japanese army. Fr. De la Costa and Fr. Mulry silently endured the tortures of Fort Santiago. Teddy Arvisu, whose seminary training was disrupted by the call to protect his country by reporting to Bataan, was captured by the Japanese and endured the death march. His vocation never wavered, as he took his vows even while the Americans were reclaiming Manila from the Japanese.

An important, yet subtle theme in the book is the initiation of the author's well-known love affair with language and

literature. One of his happiest childhood memories was reading a poem in English with his father, who translated every line into Filipino, and added an explanation for certain details of the poem. When he entered the novitiate, he was mesmerized by Latin, in its simplicity and tact. Learning the grammar and structure of Latin and Greek under Fr. De la Costa and Fr. Kerr were very challenging, yet these became experiences of genuine understanding and the capacity of language to allow for this understanding. Reading literature with Fr. Mulry led him to appreciate the world of peoples in other cultures and places. Seeing every language as a world of many treasures, Fr. Ferriols retained some expressions in English and most in Latin, Greek, Ilocano, Kapampangan (and so on). This could provide insight into why Fr. Ferriols decided to teach philosophy classes in Filipino from 1969 onward and became known for teaching most, if not all, of his philosophy classes in Filipino for the rest of his teaching career. It is clear that he did this not because he loved the Filipino language itself, but because he loved language and wanted to give Filipino its chance to flourish and enrich itself. Moreover, it served as a testament to the significant role of language in doing philosophy.

Through a retelling of Fr. Ferriols's personal narratives, the text serves as a reflection on the meaning of human civilization. Knowing what we stand to lose to war and violence, Fr. Ferriols allows his younger readers, who never had any direct knowledge of war to appreciate that what is at

stake is civilization itself. He recalls the indignation of a bishop reacting to the Japanese bombing of a convent as sheer *barbarismo*. A stark contrast is made between his year of *Poietike*, that stage in the novitiate curriculum spent studying classical literature, while the war was raging outside the walls of the novitiate. The war was both near and far, as he observed the fighting planes up in the sky behaving like swarms of flies, the shockwave of faraway artillery rocking the walls of the novitiate, and instances when Japanese officers would raid the novitiate in search of contraband items and propaganda material that could vilify the Jesuits and rationalize their intention to claim it as Japanese property. This stark contrast made him value literature and the classics, as testaments to the nobility of human civilization, all the more becoming important at a time when violence and armed struggle pointed to what was base, barbaric, and even animal. Even if the world shows us otherwise, we must not forget that we are human. We must not forget what makes us human.

To a reader who is familiar with Metro Manila as densely populated and crammed with buildings and traffic, it would be hard to imagine how it looked at the end of the war. Fr. Ferriols borrows from an elderly priest, who called Manila at the time *civitas desolata*: a place of broken roads, bridges, buildings, abandoned, and left for dead. This seems to point to the loss of civilization itself. It is important to remember this and not forget that what is at stake at a time

of war is precisely everything humans have built, achieved, and become.

The significance that Fr. Ferriols assigns to the interhuman encounter is also made evident in his book. He shows that a genuine encounter with any human being is possible. The difference between them does not matter. One can feel the spirit of brotherhood expressed in his encounter with American soldiers, who offer news or drinking water as they pass each other. Fr. Ferriols remembers very clearly the names of these foreigners he met as the war was drawing to its close. The tedious task of burying the corpses of unknown people scattered around the streets of Manila did not at all take away the awareness that every human life is a human life with dignity. As Manila rises from the ashes of liberation, he tells us of people greeting one another with the appreciation that each one had survived the war. Manila was *civitas desolata* no more. This provided the backdrop for a serendipitous encounter with Fr. Rixner, a German S.V.D. missionary, who used to frequent the Ferriols home in Sampaloc. This encounter with the old friend left him with the grace of peace, which he felt on his way home that day, and at the very moment he was recalling it.

Suhyp sa Aking Pinanggalingan has succeeded in telling its story. The book is a transcript of what an elderly sage has seen through the course of his life. It is a torch that he holds to give himself and others much needed illumination, and he offers this same torch to be passed on, so that those who

come after him will always remember and not forget the very things that we often take for granted about humanity, friendship, learning, human society, and so much more. As Fr. Ferriols puts it in his final chapter, every ending in itself is always a new beginning. The book has been written, the torch has been passed. It is now in the consciousness of the reader who now bears this torch, so that we can continue opening new possibilities for history, society and civilization. As the opening quotation, a Filipino *salawikain*, puts it: “*Ang hindi marunong lumingon sa kanyang pinanggalingan ay hindi makararating sa kanyang paroroonan*” (“Those who do not look back at their beginnings will never arrive at their destinations”).

The book is not just a slice of Ateneo history in the eyes of an elderly Jesuit. It is a milestone in Filipino historical literature. One cannot not help but hope that Fr. Ferriols will complete the other two volumes of his memoirs for us to remember and never forget where we came from.

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