

African nun shares 'goodness of life' with Filipino poor

Sister Isabel's experiences in Mozambique civil war inspire her to help Manila's needy African nun shares 'goodness of life' with Filipino poor



Death has haunted Isabel dos Santos Lobo since she was a child in far off Mozambique in southern Africa. Born to parents who lost three older children to sickness, Isabel views life as a gift.

Her parents had to ask God for a child during the early years of their marriage. Their joy was short-lived after the first-born died.

The couple again prayed for another child. They were given a daughter, who also later died. Another boy also died young.

Then her mother again became pregnant and the couple thanked God for the "gift of life."

Isabel was born in 1969. Her parents took every precaution to keep her safe and healthy. Because the parents thought their house was cursed, Isabel was sent to live with an uncle, away from the family, the sickness, and the deaths.

Isabel grew up as an "ordinary schoolgirl with ordinary hopes in life."

She joined nuns from the Congregation of Religious of Our Lady of Mercy to visit poor communities and helped them tutor children and distribute medicine to the sick.

The young Isabel saw the "reality of life." She said she realized that everyone is equal when she saw the sick in a hospital.

During the 1977-1992 civil war in her country, she realized that nobody is indispensable, although the rich always flee and seek safe havens.

With the war in Mozambique ending, Isabel became interested in becoming a nun.

Her parents protested. How can they give up their daughter who was given to them as a "gift from God?"

After a lot of persistence and some help from the nuns, Isabel's parents relented.

In 1997, Isabel took her final vows as a missionary and came to the Philippines in 2014. Since then she has worked with the "most abandoned" in an urban poor community north of Manila.

Using her "life experience" in southern Africa, Isabel conducts tutorial classes for children and the youth who find the nun "not intimidating" because she does not wear a veil.

"She smiles and hugs us, even the stinky children," said one resident.

Isabel says she embraces everyone "because if we value life, then we should embrace everyone regardless of who he or she is."

"I feel at home because of Filipino people's hospitality," she said.

"I love how people share our charism and mission to promote and value life," she added.

Because of the spate of government drug war killings in the community where she works, Isabel tries her best to inspire hope.

"To oppose the culture of death, people must exert efforts to nourish life," said the nun.

Isabel cried when she learned that the Philippines' House of Representatives was close to passing a bill to re-impose capital punishment.

"I am saddened that there are people who don't understand life and its worth," she said.

Mark Saludes - UCAN Manila