

Cast out into the deep: missionary reflections (2003 – 2010)
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He was a customary presence at the rectory, every Sunday at five in the morning. It was still dark outside, but in minutes the first rays of dawn would have gloriously lighted up the clear sky of Sibuco, my mission.

Dodong was a young man with Down syndrome in his mid-twenties, and one of the most fervent Catholics in my mission. I have rarely seen such an enthusiasm for the Holy Mass! He could not speak intelligibly, but he always made his voice clearly heard above others' voices. And he always came for Communion, which he received with great reverence. His persistent grumbling – which nobody could understand – accompanied us in our early morning chores. He was simply trying to wake us up and get us ready for the six o'clock Mass.

Meding, never idle, had already been preparing rice for the little community living with me at the rectory, since four o'clock. Abandoned by her partner, a non-Christian, along with her two little girls found at the rectory a home and a job.

Inday was a sweet girl from the mountains. Affected by polio since she was little, her legs could not sustain her frail body and she was thus destined to crouch and to crawl all her life. Now, after a painful but effective surgery, she could at least stand and walk with the help of wooden crutches. Though already in her late teens, she attended Elementary School.

Louie, a shy and reliable young man with a passion for motors, was my "right hand" at the rectory and at times my only companion in my missionary "expeditions". His folks were farmers up in the mountains and understood the importance of an education for their children. They thought that the rectory was the safest place for their son to stay. Louie was attending High School. That was "my" family down there. And, by the way, the six o'clock Mass started always on time, thanks to Dodong!

There is a story about a miller who did not care to know the name of the farmer or how he managed to carry his crop to the mill: what really mattered to him was that the harvest was of highest quality in order to produce the best flour in the region.

The idea of building a mill in the mountain sounded very daring, if not crazy. But in the end we made it! With the generous help and labor of many, we were about to inaugurate the Saint Joseph Cooperative corn and rice mill. The Muslim majority of Sibuco was somewhat irritated with their "imams". Now the Christians had their mill and the Muslims still had to wait for their leaders to do something useful for them. Because – of course – only Christians would be allowed to use that corn and rice mill.

We were aware of this conviction, rooted in centuries of mistrust and suspicion between Muslims and Christians in Mindanao. But was there a difference between Muslim corn and Christian corn? Was Christian rice better than Muslim rice? Were not rice and corn the basic food of every human being living in the Southern Philippines? Was it not true that everybody enjoys a meal of good rice or good corn?

All these questions made clear sense to anyone, Muslim and Christians alike, but none had the courage to proclaim the simple truth. So we decided to stir up the whole village. We invited our good friend Hajji Ibrahim, the young teacher at the local Quranic School, to be present at the inauguration and give his blessing to the new mill, even before our Bishop. Hajji Ibrahim said the blessing in Arabic, and it was a great surprise for everybody, something unheard of that Muslims could pray to the Holy One in the very place where Christians tried to carry out the command of the Lord to love your neighbor.

From that year on, the corn and rice mill became a meeting place for neighboring Christian and Muslim farmers: while they were waiting for their turn to mill their crops, they started talking to each other. Slowly and hesitantly a dialogue begun. They blessed God, no matter in what language, for He loves all those who enjoy the aroma of freshly milled rice and relish the fragrance of newly milled corn.