

Letter from the Philippines

Hunger the Problem in Bukidnon

Father Welch, a native of Webster, has spent most of his 38 years in the priesthood in the Jesuit missions in the Philippines.

By FATHER LEO WELCH, SJ

Bukidnon, Philippines — A typhoon brought on a serious flood in the northern part of this island of Mindanao on Dec. 3 and 4. The down-pour of rain by itself might not have been so bad but the hillsides in the mountains have been denuded by the loggers, so the run-off was very quick. Many abandoned logs jammed and caused dams in the rivers, and the streams spread out in all directions. When a dam broke up, the mass of water rushed down the hills and carried away houses and trees which a minute before had been on dry land.

After the flood we had a very severe drought. There was no rain

to speak of from early December to the beginning of May. This covers more months than one growing season. Here in Bukidnon and in the neighboring provinces the main crop of almost all the farmers is corn and usually they raise three crops of corn in one year. Corn is their staple food. When milled, the corn grits look much like rice. It is steam-cooked like rice and at times it tastes almost like rice. After a harvest most farmers have to sell a good part of their crop to the corner store to pay the debt they have run up there. Before the next harvest they will have to buy corn to eat at a price much higher than their selling price. This year because of the drought there was no harvest and their credit has long since been exhausted at the corner store and at every store. So now thousands of people are going hungry. They have been hungry for some months already and they will still be hungry until August when they

expect another harvest.

Some people grow other things than corn-rice — coconuts, fruit and vegetables. But the drought was so severe that every thing suffered and "scorched earth" seem to be proper words to describe what was left. Some men go fishing and some go hunting (without a gun, since martial law confiscated all the guns) but the take is very little. Many people have gotten sick from eating wild roots. Three members of one of my families died from eating wild roots. The parents of a family in Kilbureao, driven to despair by the suffering and the weeping of their starved children, got poison and killed all of them. And then they themselves committed suicide."

I have tried to get help from the Government but without success. The Red Cross says to the beggars: "You are not victims of fire or flood, therefore we cannot help you." Under martial law there is no more voting, so the hungry have not even a vote to sell. This is the time of rice harvest in Luzon. The bishops and priests are trying to pressure the dictator into shipping some of the rice down here. From the Catholic Relief Services I was able to get 80 sacks of U.S. Bulgor and am trying to get more. I dropped off a few of the 80 sacks in each of ten towns and it was all gone in one day. What are 80 sacks among 15,000 hungry parishioners!

So my main problem right now is hunger. It must be real painful hunger from the looks on the faces of some of the parents. They keep coming and begging day after day even when there is nothing available. This morning I gave them the bread I had bought for the children who come here for dinner. When the children came from the school I told them



OUR PARISH COUNCIL Bernard Lyons

The death of the Christian is the true eu-thanasia — the "good death."

Instead of denying death, the Christian sees it as a doorway to eternal life.

If these thoughts seem strange to us in the 20th century it is because our Catholic tradition has become surrounded with a society that attempts to deny death.

All of us will one day die. We say that, yet within the same thought, we almost always put it off to some never-never day.

In many of our parishes, the typical parishioner is shielded from death. Yes, there are fleeting mentions of death in the Sunday readings and homily. But for the most part there is little opportunity for serious discussion of death.

Our parish funerals take place during the work week, when usually only the close relatives and friends take the time to attend the funeral liturgy.

The subject of death is multifaceted. These facets range all the way from "Why death?" to the meaning of Christ's resurrection for our death to death in the Christian tradition and the practical matters of how and where to be buried.

The parish council, or at least one of the committees or several committees ought to provide opportunities for parishioners to celebrate the funeral liturgy and to consider questions relating to death.

Discussions of death might be controversial in some parishes. There will always be those who will say, "Why discuss anything so morbid?" And when a group begins to discuss some practical aspects about death, such as the standard commercial funeral arrangements, they might hear some arguments from funeral directors and others.

In recent years there have been some excellent studies of dying, death and funeral practices.

A few books that I would recommend are On Death and

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Dying, by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross; Talking About Death: A Dialogue Between Parent and Child, by Earl A. Grollman; and The American Way of Death, by Jessica Mitford.

Perhaps the simplest way for a committee or group to begin discussing the Christian and his attitude and approaches to death, would be to send for the summer bulletin of the St. Leo League. The St. Leo Bulletin is published as an educational tool in the field of Christian art and liturgy.

The summer issue (No. 68) is available free, but it would be well to enclose an 8c stamp when you request it from the St. Leo Bulletin, Box 577, Newport, R.I. 02840.

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