

“Healing the wounds of colonisation”

The Fight against poverty in the heart of an integrated social pastoral ministry

Sergio Ferrari*



Tobias Denzler is a Vet and a tireless globetrotter. His trips between Switzerland and the different Southern Hemisphere countries are as many as his professional engagements in development and as a vet. His life living between continents began in the early nineties. Back then Tobias Denzler lived with his family in Bhutan for 5 years. He worked for Helvetas as a consultant and project manager of the livestock and horse breeding projects. Since April 2011, he has been living in Manila, the capital of the Philippines, where he is working as the

Coordinator of Bethlehem Mission Immesee (BMI). In the intervening two decades he practised as a veterinarian and undertook various additional development mandates in the south of Sudan, Mongolia and India, as well as having held teaching positions at the Swiss College of Agriculture in Zollikofen (Bern).

At the time, he would always ask himself the following fundamental questions: “What can I contribute to make the world a fairer place? How is a joint collaboration between different cultures with different problems but similar needs possible?” He adds: “Since arriving in the Philippines, it has been my humble desire to work from the roots to change the world a little. I always find the challenge to agree on a goal, and embark on a common path, despite the cultural differences, enriching and exciting. I am convinced that each growth type is based upon the improvement of the quality of life of the poor”. Here is the interview with Tobias Denzler:

What is the current program and presence of BMI in the Philippines?

In recent years, BMI supplemented its classical pastoral work with the integration of social work. This means that together with our partner dioceses, we are committed to environmental concerns, health promotion and the fight against corruption. With a local NGO we have tried to support the peace process between the different ethnic groups. There are currently 8 specialists, from Switzerland and Germany, working in the north from Luzon. This number is expected to increase to 10 next year.

What criteria are these key thematic concerns based on?

In its principle on the “preservation of creation”, a primary concern of the Catholic Church in the Philippines is to carry out the most important social tasks. With the formation of church based communities attempts are made at village level to improve the situation of many disadvantaged people. Combating poverty is a complex issue and includes health care, family planning, conservation of natural resources, preservation of cultural identity, fighting corruption, creating jobs and much more. In so doing BMI, with their development workers, support local partner organisations with their specific expertise.

Faith and Religion go hand in hand in the fight against corruption.

Could you give us an example of a development worker assignment?

An example could be the planned construction of an irrigation system in a village. The irrigation system should have been built to irrigate the rice terraces, thus protecting the livelihoods of the farmers. The local government received a large grant for the project but the funds provided for the irrigation scheme disappeared into the pockets of the politicians, engineers and companies. The project was never realised, and the farmers in this region were forced to move or to cut down the last of the forest reserves to produce charcoal, or to use chemical fertilisers and pesticides for their vegetable farming. In our efforts, together with our development workers, to strengthen local voluntary groups in the fight against corruption, we also look to conserve natural resources.

Another example, this time in health care: Here the local population are taught about hygiene and waste disposal as part of an integrated nutritional programme. The families here are motivated to create their own garden with organic vegetables and medicinal plants. Health and environmental issues are directly linked. When drinking water is polluted with sewage and pesticides, this has a direct influence on health. It is also important to strengthen the church based groups and to talk about ethical behaviour. If issues such as combating corruption and vote rigging, or the value of preserving the natural diversity are discussed with like minded groups at village level, this adds tremendous value and helps the understanding and active supporting of projects.

In short: with the use of our volunteer professionals, non high-tech patented solutions are possible for large regions. It is, however, more important to come up with an easy customised solution together with the local target group and to implement them jointly.

Helping people help themselves

Can you help to promote self-help?



In an ideal world, with our development workers, this is possible. I would like to refer to another example: The eco-tourism project in the Mount Kalawitan region, one of the highest mountains in the Philippines. Here a number of local farmers and hunters, who previously plundered the tropical rain forest, by slashing, burning and hunting it, were trained as eco-tourist guides. They are now interested in preserving the tropical rain forest and with eco-tourism they now have a new source of revenue with which to secure their livelihoods.

Or the reforestation project in the Pagasinan province: With the help of local groups, a range of hills were partly reforested with Acacia trees. When the contract with the BMI development worker came to an end, the new bishop did not want to continue this project. Under pressure from the farmers group involved in the diocese, church leaders were convinced of the collaboration's importance and requested a new BMI specialist. In conclusion, the environmental and building projects can be described as major successes. These projects represent a great need of the beneficiary population which are supported by the church.

Does the fact that BMI deals mainly with the church, limit the interaction opportunities with other key organisations of the Philippine civil society?

It is a fact that our partner organisations are mostly dioceses. About 80 percent of Filipinos are Catholics, with strong family values and a deep faith. In the face of poverty, the aftermaths of ongoing natural disasters such as typhoons, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions and earthquakes, family and religion are the two key elements that give people renewed hope and vitality.

As a foreigner, we can use the church partner organisations as a link and a way of accessing the local population. Since the church maintains many social networks, our presence as so called “lay missionaries”, who work as professionals with the local church is understood and accepted by the population. BMI development workers often work together with village groups, which are already united in church base communities. BMI specialists have the opportunity to design, implement and monitor projects, in their fields of expertise, over a longer period of time. A central task is to build networks that would enable the exchange of local knowledge. This can be in the form of training, expertise, or in the networking of local organisations. As such, we work together with religious private and public organisations. Basically, it is also possible to deal with private NGO partners as was the case with the peace promoting event.

The very conservative and submissive attitude of a large part of the Philippine Church to Rome is not always a simple aspect. This pressure is especially reflected in important social issues, such as family planning and modern contraceptive methods, where the Catholic Church is strongly against the State.

Horizontal cooperation based on mutual respect

Does this mean that cooperation is not always easy in such a complex environment?

For us, the experience of sharing and mutual respect is essential. We accept that the same reality can be seen with different eyes, and that both parties can be right. In our work we aim to meet communities and partner organisations on equal footings. We often benefit mutually from each other on various levels. We may perhaps be good at organising, but may not be able to improvise in difficult situations the way our partners are used to. We often act rationally, our partners intuitively. It's not always easy to manage all the contrasts. If we manage to succeed, these contrasts become complementary and encouraging, which is of great professional and personal benefit.

Does this mean that development workers in the Philippines must be open minded and very understanding?

Yes, but I think this is true not only of the Philippines but throughout the world. The history of the Philippines is a story of centuries of colonisation and foreign dominion that have changed the cultural values and identity of the country. For us, it is easier to live a partnership of understanding in the sense of a dialogue on the same plain than for the Filipino. Often I think our principle task is to heal the wounds our ancestors left with colonisation. These wounds are still strongly noticeable and visible amongst the nation.

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