

Former OFW finds her true calling

Over the objections of her family, Juanita Dano traded her working clothes for a nun's habit, writes **Gabby Alvarado**

Many are called but few are chosen. Fewer still are those who are blessed enough to leave the ranks of OFWs and become full-time servants of the Lord. Leaving families, for whom they are breadwinners, to pursue a religious vocation takes extraordinary faith and courage on the part of OFWs.

But Sr Maria Juanita Renos Dano, of the Religious of the Good Shepherd, found an ingenious way of following her true calling.

"Against ang parents ko sa decision ko to be a nun, kaya inako ko na magpaaral ng dalawang nakababata kong kapatid," Sister Nenet says. "I prepared my parents well financially, even my eldest sister who is a widow. They never agreed with my choice but they do not have a choice either."

For six years in the 1990s, including two in pre-Handover Hong Kong, Sister Nenet, straight from university, worked as a domestic helper – more out of curiosity than necessity.

"I asked my parents if I could join a friend just to try and see why Filipinos love to work in other countries," she explains. "Obsessed akong malaman ang tunay na dahilan ng migration, kasi mahirap lang kami but my parents were able to send us to school at kayang-kaya din namin as working student."

She is not the first, and surely not the last, OFW to trade her working clothes for a nun's habit.

"There are a lot of them who have this religious vocation even before they come here. But they need to help their families first," says Sr. Aida Casambre, RGS, of the Diocesan Pastoral Centre for Filipinos in Central where the future Sister Nenet was once a volunteer.

"Being helpers in Hong Kong strengthens their faith. They become active in religious groups and activities."



Sister Nenet (right, inset) is on her second tour of duty in Senegal. Above, volunteers pose with their wards.

Now a member of a religious order, Sister Nenet is no different from the OFW she once was, only with a nobler mission: She is in Mbour, Senegal – one of 13 nuns working in communities made up of Christians and Muslims. Their activities include counselling in crisis centers, prison ministry and helping victims of prostitution and pedophiles. They are also involved in literacy programs.

"Friendly at mabagal mag-react. Passive," Sister Nenet says of the Senegalese. "Kahit nadedehado na, okay lang. Challenge sa akin to help them open their minds to those things that block their growth and development."

As a voice of the oppressed, Sister Nenet has had plenty of training during her OFW years, starting in

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SISTER NENET
On her lifelong dream

Malaysia where she worked for four years as a tutor and domestic helper in a Chinese household. "Every two weeks lang ang day off ko kasi 'yon ang law ng Malaysia before. Volunteer ako sa St Francis Xavier Church sa Petaling Jaya," she recalls. "Hinahanap namin ang mga DH na hindi binigyan ng layang mag-day off at yung nadedehado. Kasama ako sa nagbigay ng boses upang ang weekly day off ng Pinay ay ma-implement."

She went to Hong Kong in 1995, mainly as an encoder and bookkeeper in a business run by a couple in Tsuen Wan. She also cooked for them and took care of their Doberman to justify her employment as a domestic helper.

At the Pastoral Centre, she became

more aware of the problems facing OFWs.

"Umiikot kami para i-inform ang ating mga kababayan not to engage in illegal work, at kung may forum about issues that touch OFWs kasama kami na mag-organize at mag-inform."

"Wish ng grupo namin na mag-POSE minsan as 'akyat-barko' [women offering their services to seamen] para ma-meet ang mga Pinay na gumagawa nito. Kaya lang di nangyari kasi halata daw kami at may warning na baka mapahamak lang kami."

By June 1997, she had turned her back on Hong Kong to answer God's call.

"Eight years old pa lang ako feel ko na ang magmadre, pero di lang pagmamadre. I wished to be a soldier, idol ko kasi si San Ignacio de Loyola," she says.

Born in Cebu to devoutly Catholic parents and raised in Lilo-an, Southern Leyte, Sister Nenet, the third in a family of five, learned that charity begins at home. "My parents often told us that no matter how poor we are, there is no reason that we could not find ways to share with others in need ... Ito yong ginamit kong debate when I insisted to be a nun. Sa kanila nagsimula ang tawag ko, sinundan ko lang naman."

The French-speaking nun is now on her second tour of duty in Senegal. She was there for two years until 2005, coming home briefly for her father's funeral and her final vows.

"Ang ganda ng samahan dito between Muslims and Catholics. Generous ang mga Muslims. Yung computer technician na close namin in-explain ko lang 'yong work namin nagbigay agad ng computer. May pharmacist din dito na palagi akong binibigyan ng 10 per cent discount dahil alam niya na ang mga gamot di para sa akin pero para sa mga may sakit."

Our own OFWs come to mind as world salutes women

March 8, 2008 marked the 98th annual celebration of International Women's Day. As the month of March approached, stories of protest rallies and women issues-focused forums reminded me about this significant day, which, in some countries like Russia, Mongolia and even Vietnam is an official holiday.

Here in Beijing, on the eve of the occasion, the All-China Women's Federation staged a big celebration at the historic Great Hall of the People. It was a festive commemoration attended by distinguished senior women government officials, representatives from the diplomatic corps and delegates from various women groups in China.

In her keynote address, Madam Gu Xulian, chairwoman of the federation, highlighted the tremendous contribution and emerging new roles of women in China, underscoring specifically their noteworthy involvement in the upcoming Olympic Games.

One of the highlights was a three-

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part cultural presentation. Various women's groups from China and the international community took turns in delighting the audience with interesting numbers.

The Arab Ambassadors Spouses Group performed an Arabic Fashion Show; the Group of Residents of Iberia-Latin America presented an upbeat number dubbed Enthusiastic Latin America; the Group of African Ambassador Spouses performed an African dance that was full of life and character while we members of the Asean Ladies Circle serenaded the women-dominated audience with our own rendition of the Asean theme song, Let Us Move Ahead.

The Olympic frenzy here in Beijing



Fittingly, the celebration brings together women of all nationalities.

is simply unstoppable that any major event is never complete without the Olympic touch. Local artist Tan Ning, along with the New Silk Road teenage models, capped the two-hour program with their vibrant interpretation of the Olympic theme song, One World, One Dream.

My jovial mood was interrupted by the thought of millions of unsung and nameless women heroes of modern times. While humming and clapping as the African ladies did

their captivating numbers, I thought of the women in parts of war and poverty-stricken Africa who have been victims of slavery, prostitution and rape. I admired in awe as tall, svelte, pretty and sophisticated Chinese ladies modeled the elegant qipao or cheongsam (Chinese traditional dress). But a reality check transported my thoughts to the construction site nearby our apartment. Everyday, I see a

good number of women workers in hard hats, spade in hand, taking turns in collecting gravel and sand, maneuvering a wheelbarrow or manually collecting bricks from one point to another.

While belting out the Asean song with lines that go "... the future's ours, we have the strength, we can find the peace within ourselves and with the world," I affectionately remembered our women OFWs, especially our kababayans in Hong Kong – the "Ates," "Manangs", "Nanays" – with whom I have nurtured beautiful friendships.

They each have their own heartwarming, inspiring and sometimes, heartbreaking stories to tell of how they have left home to search for the proverbial greener pasture. These stories of strength and courage, inner beauty and faith, inspiration and achievement amidst adversity truly make for a more meaningful celebration for women, which, should not only be commemorated in a day, but every day of our lives.