

## **A BEC STORY (SAN FERNANDO BUKIDNON, MINDANAO PHILIPPINES)**

*Excerpt from Fr. Amado L. Picardal's Article on "BECs and Social Transformation", pp. 150-155 from "BECs: Dream or Reality" (Taytay: Bukal ng Tipan, 2004)*

We are poor peasants, living in small Christian communities in a remote valley of San Fernando, Bukidnon (Southern Philippines). We have lived amongst violence – the violence of poverty, guerilla war, of the destruction of our environment and violence of the military. But we have walked in the way of peace – the way of the cross, and have experienced its liberating power.

This is our story.

There was a time when the mountains were green and the river was blue. The heavy rains did not flood our farms. Nor did the long, hot summers parch the land. That was before the logging companies came. They were owned by the politicians and protected by soldiers. We watched helplessly as the trucks passed by carrying away the logs to be shipped to foreign lands. We signed petitions asking the government to stop the loggers from turning our land into a desert and our river into a highway. But we never got any response. Then the Redemptorist Mission Team came: priests, brothers, sisters and lay missionaries. They lived among us and worked with us to build Christian communities (BECs). In our nipa huts late at night, and in our bamboo chapels on Sundays, we came together to listen to the Word and to listen to each others' words. We realized that to be true Christians, it was not enough to worship and to read the Bible. We have to care for others and care for the earth. We have to defend the forest – which is our home, the home of our neighbors – the native Dumagats and Subanons, the home of the birds, the animals, and wild plants.

The day came when we gathered on the road where the logging trucks pass. There were several hundreds of us – men, women, children, and old people. We barricaded with our bodies and the logging trucks could no longer pass. It was like a fiesta. We sang and danced, we shared our food with one another and with the loggers who were stranded. It was a real communion. The priests, the brothers, sisters, and lay missionaries were with us. Even the Bishop came one night to pray with us. They listened to us when we shared with them our stories and our reflections on the Word of God and on the unfolding event. It was our turn to proclaim and witness the Gospel.

Those who did **not** join us taunted us. They said that we will never succeed. We were poor, powerless and few and we were up against rich businessmen and powerful politicians who were protected by the military and who could bribe the judges.

On the 13<sup>th</sup> day in the barricade while celebrating the Eucharist with our parish priest, a truckload of soldiers came carrying an order from the judge to disperse us. They beat us without mercy. They did not spare the old people and the pregnant women. They even beat the statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. We did not resist them.

When they brought our parish priest to the prison camp we also went with him. We told the soldiers that if they will imprison him they will also have to imprison all of us. They finally told all of us to go home with our parish priest. We went back to the side of the road that we used to barricade and watched helplessly as the logging trucks passed by. We prayed and cried. We were defeated. It was our Good Friday. The sky darkened and the heavens wept with us unceasingly.

It rained day and night for a couple of weeks. The river rose and the overflowing waters crashed against the bridge where all the logging trucks pass. And the bridge collapsed. The road leading up to the logging camp was blocked by a landslide. The logging operations were stopped. Nature

continued the barricade for us. When we gathered the following night to pray on the side of the road where the logging trucks used to pass we all praised and thanked God who had not abandoned us.

A few weeks later we were ordered to appear in court before the corrupt judge. We filled the courtroom – men, women, children, old people. We were not afraid even if we were poor and powerless because we believed that God's Spirit was with us. We were charged with violating the law and causing the logging companies huge loss of profits. The judge scolded us as if we were naughty children and set the date for our trial. We knew that the judge was on the side of the loggers. Our main worry was where to get that huge amount of money to pay the loggers if we lose the case.

Meanwhile, the newspapers, the TV and the radio began to report our story. Suddenly the conscience of many all over the country was awakened. They realized that our problem was also their problem. Many began to show their support. And there were even others in different parts of the country who followed our example. Our voice was beginning to be heard and finally, the President of the Philippines ordered a stop to the logging operations in San Fernando.

When we heard the good news our tears of sorrow became tears of joy. Our suffering had not been in vain. We thanked God by celebrating the Eucharist and by having an instant fiesta. It was our Easter Sunday.

When we went back to the courtroom the judge reluctantly dropped all charges against us. A few months later a pastoral letter of the Bishop's Conference was read in all the Catholic churches and chapels all over the archipelago. It spoke about the ecological crisis in our country. And it mentioned the struggle of the people of San Fernando as a sign of hope and as an example for all. We could not believe that we in our insignificance and powerless can make a difference.

Our story and our struggle should have ended then. But it did not. One year later we discovered that while the logging had stopped in San Fernando it continued in the neighboring mountains. We realized that even if it happened in other places we would be affected because we were all connected.

And so we found ourselves once again in the barricade far away from home – in the provincial capital. This time we were more numerous because the people from the neighboring areas joined us. We wanted the logging to be stopped in the entire province of Bukidnon. At first we pitched our tents outside the office of the Department of Natural Resources. They just ignored us. And on the fifth day we transferred to the checkpoint in the national highway where all the logging trucks usually stop for inspection. We took over the place and set up a human barricade. And all the logging trucks could no longer get through. The soldiers came and they could not disperse us. The truck drivers tried to drive through the barricade.

Once again the newspapers, radio and TV reported our story. Finally, Secretary Factoran of the DENR heeded our request for a dialogue. He came on the helicopter to meet with us. After listening to us he granted our demands. He told us the logging in the neighboring mountains and towns would be stopped. He asked us to help guard the forest. We went home rejoicing and thanking God once again for not abandoning us. The Eucharist became a victory celebration.

Now the logging companies have disappeared from San Fernando and from the neighboring mountains of Bukidnon. The trees that we have planted are growing. When our children grow up they will see green mountains and they can swim and fish in the blue river without fear. The heavy rains will not flood their farms nor the long hot summers parch the land. They will remember us for what we did for them. And they will remember the wonderful things God has done for us.