

Memorial Homily for Dr. Emilia R. Salanga-Schwartz



We honor the late **Dr. Emilia R. Salanga-Schwartz**, Class of 1956, Psychiatry, who was a very generous donor to UPMASA.

“Dr. Salanga-Schwartz, having chosen to leave the bulk of her legacy to a worthy cause, speaks of her passion to leave this earth a better place. She had specifically mentioned the University of the Philippines College of Medicine Student Scholarship Grants. She wanted to nurture those who would choose to become doctors to heal mankind - physically, mentally, emotionally. We salute you - Dr. Emilia Salanga-Schwartz! May your legacy live forever!”

Dr. Geraldine Gomez-Pinder
Chair, Finance Committee

Below is her brother’s, **Fr. Victor Salanga, SJ**, memorial homily for Dr. Salanga-Schwartz last 25 January 2018, who he says, “Em was not one who favored feature articles on herself.”

God looked at everything he had made, and found it very good. (Genesis 1:31)

(Jesus) said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was distressed that he had said to him a third time, “Do you love me?” so he said, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Feed my sheep.” (John 21:17)

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Before **Em** or **Emily** (as she was fondly called by a small circle of close friends) died, **Cena**, my sister, and I asked whether she wanted a memorial Mass. She said, “Yes.” We needed to ask because she was not a practicing Catholic. I am quite aware how many persons may have been hurt by pastors and ministers or by scandal and hypocrisy and so have moved away from organized religion. So there was no difficulty for me to accept Em and whatever beliefs and ritual practices she held or did not hold. I believe that God’s heart is greater, bigger—much, much more magnanimous than any of our narrow, puny hearts.

You may have been surprised by the Genesis reading. It describes God’s first and foremost act of love, namely the creation of everything, the heavens and earth. It declares in no uncertain terms that all that God created is “good”! The reading repeats “good” six times! The last time the word appears, it comes with the word, “very.” When God looked at **everything** that he had made, he found it “**very good.**”

On the fifth day, when God creates all kinds of birds, sea monsters and all kinds of living creatures in the water, not only did he declare them good, he also blessed them. When he created humankind in his image and likeness, he blessed them. When God completed the work he had done, he blessed the seventh day. The other significant word that is repeated is “blessed”—blessing!

Julian of Norwich, a 14th century lady mystic, called this “the original blessing” –something which many have forgotten because somehow, what caught their attention, what blind-sided them was their fascination with “original sin.” Yet, original blessing comes in the first chapter of Genesis; it comes at the head of the Hebrew scripture and our scripture, and original sin comes only in the third chapter! If we were to continue to read the stories in Genesis as in the great flood in Chapter 6, where many words and phrases hint, allude, go back to Genesis 1, the final word is not sin and punishment. When the flood subsided and all the animals had gone out of the ark, God says to Noah: “Never again will I doom the earth because of man, even though the desires of man’s heart are evil from the start, nor will I ever again strike down all living beings, as I have done. God’s final word is not sin and punishment; his final word is restoration and forgiveness. For God is indeed good and all of his creation is good! Or as Julian of Norwich says: “God is everything which is good ... and the goodness which is everything is God.”

Em certainly rejoiced in this original blessing. She was diagnosed with thyroid cancer at age twenty-six. She survived it! Since then she never took life for granted. She relished life! That explains her many, many years of travel and adventure and yes, enormous curiosity. She loved watching National Geo, Wild Geo, Nature, Nova and Globe Trekker. She enjoyed music. She played the piano. She went to Broadway musicals, enjoyed concerts, operas and ballets. She dabbled—no, not just dabbled--she really invested in stocks--and that is why she loved Jim Cramer’s TV show, Mad Money. Em claimed that Jim Cramer did the homework she needed to be able to invest in the right stocks. Sometime in her late forties, she suffered from a very serious allergy that threatened her life again. She survived it! Cena says that Em cheated death twice! But each time, it emboldened her to enjoy as much as she could the life that was offered her.

To enjoy God’s original blessing also meant an audacious acceptance of reality. “Face reality; face the stark truth,” she often told me, “Don’t run away from reality; don’t run from the truth. Accept reality; accept the truth!” And then, “Change, adjust, adapt to new circumstances!” Like a good psychiatrist, she

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would add, “Be aware of your illusions, your delusions for--by knowing and accepting the truth, the truth **will** set you free.” When Em’s rib cage pains were getting unbearable, she talked with my brother, Bert, and informed him that she was dying. Bert kept urging her to eat and heal and get back to health! (*Magpagaling ka, Manang!*) “What for?” she pointedly asked, “I won’t get back to the quality of life that I desire. I choose to die.”

But make no mistake, Em was just as human like any of us. She had her own share of weaknesses and faults, her own blind spots. She too could be manipulative, so straight talking she did not notice that she had hurt the other person.

That is why I chose for our gospel the touching scene between Peter and the risen Jesus at the shore of Tiberias. The context is that Peter had betrayed Jesus three times. Now, having been asked three times whether he loved Jesus, Peter, distressed, exclaims, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Beyond our weaknesses and faults, beyond our blind spots, God knows much, much more what is truly in our hearts; much, much deeper than we can ever know ourselves. God knows! Because after all he created us. And he created us good, very good, our original blessing!

I would be remiss if I did not say anything about “**Charlie**,” Em’s very smart, Congo grey parrot. Charlie did not just say “words or phrases”; he spoke for the most part in complete sentences! For twenty years, Charlie was a very good companion to Em. Since I spent my weekends these past ten years with Em and kept her company, I became part of Em’s and Charlie’s world.

I will always cherish in my memory the time when it was time for us in the apartment to sleep. Charlie would ask repeatedly, “Shall we go to sleep now?” Em would say, “No, we are still watching TV.” After some minutes, Charlie would ask again: “Shall we sleep now?” And Em would again say “no.” This exchange between Charlie and Em would repeat many times. Finally, when Em decides to go to sleep, she turns off the light in the den where Charlie is, goes to the bathroom, brushes her teeth and gurgles. You would hear Charlie gurgling too! When she passes the den to her bedroom, Charlie would say, “Good night, sweetie!” Em would answer: “Good night, Charlie!” In some way, this is also a memorial for Charlie! Bob, Cena’s husband, and I brought Charlie to an exotic bird sanctuary in Tampa, Florida a few days ago where he could be free to fly and be a bird again! God bless you, Em and God bless you too, Charlie. You are good, very good! You are both free now. Enjoy your new lives! Amen.

Victor Salanga, SJ

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