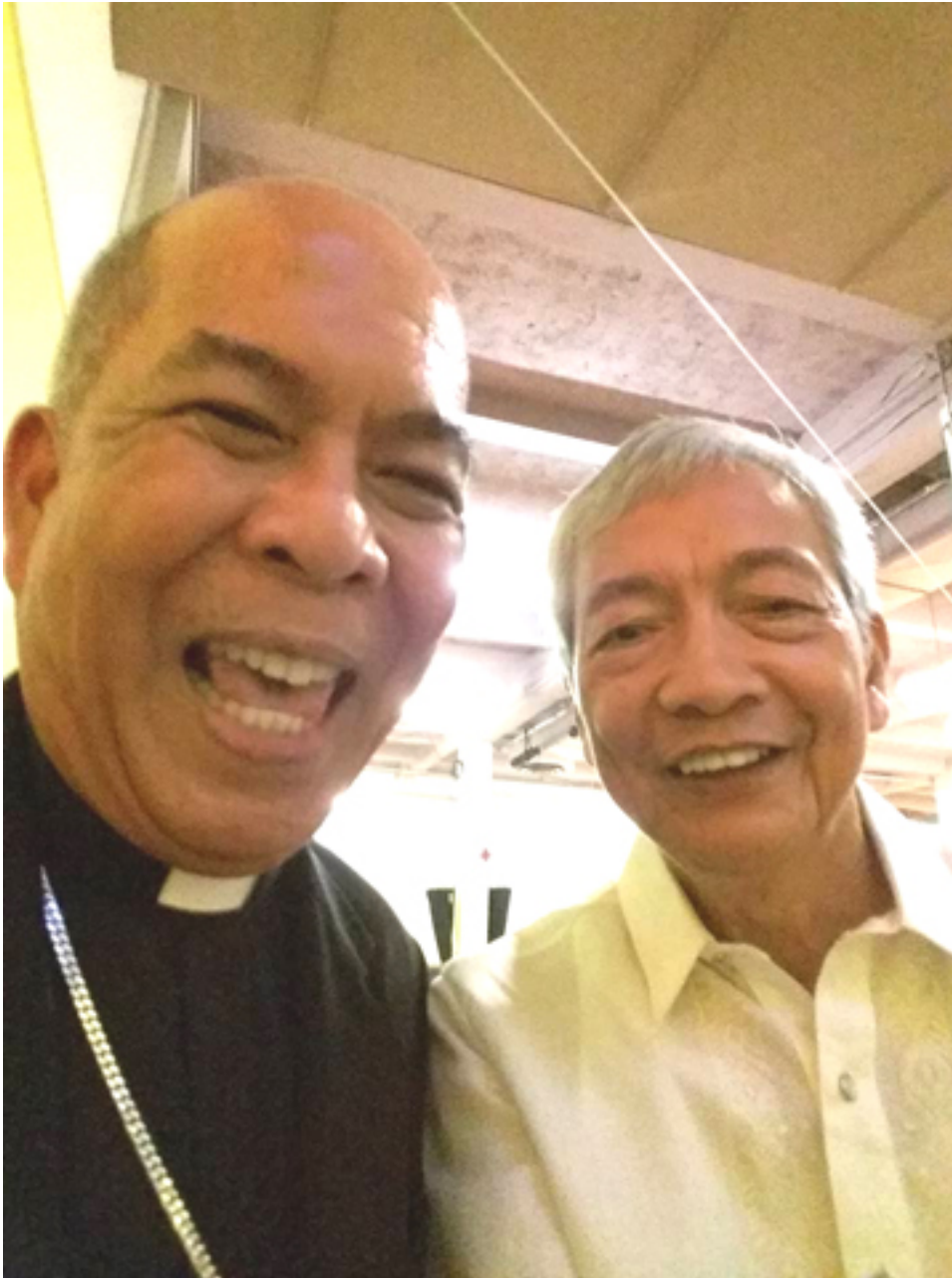


Is President Duterte still Catholic or not?

Written by Manuel Caballero
Friday, 05 August 2016 16:38



Archbishop Romulo G. Valles (left) with the author, Manny Caballero.

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NEVER before had I experienced what I did last weekend.

Together with some of my brothers and sisters in Couples for Christ, I spent some time with around 60 Boholano priests who came from various states of the U.S. and Canada.

They had a reunion in New York City.

There were also five Filipino archbishops from Visayas and Mindanao and one from New York, Boholano Archbishop Bernardito Auza, the Permanent Representative of Holy See to the United Nations, who hosted the three-day biennial reunion.

It's a different feeling knowing you are in the company of many men of God whose lives are dedicated to holiness.

Of course, no one is holy yet.

(Even Blessed Teresa of Calcutta died without believing that she had attained holiness. The same was true with Pope Saint John Paul II.)

During the "Fiesta Sa Nayon" last Friday night in a church in Downtown Manhattan, I sought for an archbishop from Davao in order to interview him.

You will recall one of the interviews of Uncle Digong Duterte after his election to the presidency, but before his inauguration.

This was before he came to warpath with Philippine media.

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When the subject about a pastoral letter, which was evidently directed against his candidacy, was read in Catholic churches in Luzon (I learned most Catholic priests in the Visayas and Mindanao campaigned in favor of Uncle Digong) before the May 2016 elections was brought up, the uncle cursed the bishops and priests.

Remember that?

He also announced, then, that he was no longer Catholic.

However, he was quick to clarify that not all bishops and priests were his enemies.

He mentioned he had a bishop and priest friends in Davao.

First thing I did last Friday was to research how many archbishops there are in Davao.

I learned there's only one.

And that archbishop was present in the reunion because he originally hailed from Bohol.

His name, Archbishop Romulo G. Valles.

I sought for him and caught up with him as he was going down the stage after addressing his fellow priests and the Filipinos in the hall.

My interview turned to a friendly conversation.

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Archbishop Valles admitted to me he was the one alluded to by Uncle Digong in above-cited interview as his bishop friend.

His friendship with his fellow Davaoeno and closeness with the President became evident as we proceeded talking.

The prelate mentioned it was Uncle Digong's mother who was the midwife who delivered him.

When I asked whether or not Uncle Digong was still a Catholic in view of the latter's earlier abdication, the archbishop answered in a low voice he would like to think the President was still a Catholic because of the following:

- He would not forsake his mother who was an avid Catholic. He was baptized a Catholic. So he will always be Catholic.
- He allowed a Catholic prelate to give the invocation in his inauguration.
- He asked two Catholic priests to bless his house in Malacañang compound.
- His behavior is still Catholic in many respects, like when he kissed the hands of Cardinal Emeritus Vidal and Cardinal Luis Tagle in recent courtesy calls.

The archbishop reminded us that when Uncle Digong expresses something which sounds controversial, the listener should interpret what he heard from a wider context.

This is the same advice we got from people close to Pope Francis on how to interpret the

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Pope's seemingly controversial pronouncements.

On the issue of possible conversion, I brought up two issues: extra-judicial killings and Uncle Digong getting married in church.

(The first marriage was annulled civilly, but not in church.)

Archbishop Valles said the first one (extra-judicial killings) was valid.

On the second topic of marriage in a church with his 20-year partner, the archbishop said, "How about going back to his first wife?"

I sensed something at that point.

The prelate loves the President and his family.

The same kind attitude towards Uncle Digong was what I observed from a couple of Davao priests I talked to a day after that evening event.

After thanking Archbishop Valles for the frank and candid interview he gave about his friend, President Rodrigo Duterte, I was reminded of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, acclaimed 19th century English poet and critic, who once said, "As there is much beast and some devil in man, so is there some angel and some God in him."

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