

Teresita L. Nuval: Commencement speech. Honorary Doctorate in Ministry. May 14, 2014 CTU

I am very grateful and deeply honored to receive this Honorary Doctorate in Ministry award from CTU. I am also deeply humbled, and more so, as I receive this award alongside Cardinal Tagle, one of my heroes, and someone who is well known on the world stage. Thank you Fr. Mark Francis, the Board of Trustees and the faculty.

This award is also a tribute to the many people who have influenced me – the parish leaders, their families and the countless numbers of volunteers who have unequivocally supported the mission and vision of Asian Ministry and stayed on as we experienced our ups and downs. To my family, who are the first responders and have been my primary support. To my department director (my boss) who patiently sat through many stories, concerns and problems that needed to be addressed. Many of them here are here tonight. It does take a whole village to build an evangelizing community of faith of the mystical body of Christ.

I started in the Asian ministry over 25 years ago. Before that, I worked in nursing education, mostly in the field of psychiatric nursing, and in various nursing management positions, but my life seemed destined early on to serve the Church.

My sisters and I grew up in a small and strongly Catholic town, where life revolved around two things: school, and church. We were regaled by tales of Belgian missionaries whom my grandparents hosted when they arrived in our town. I can still remember the loud ringing of the steeple bells calling everyone home to pray the angelus, and the evening rosary being broadcast for everyone to hear for miles.

In nursing school, the nuns taught us the most beautiful prayer that I kept in my heart and pray daily even now. At the start of every day, we prayed to always treat and care for the patient with dignity, for every patient is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is made unto the image and likeness of God. It kept me grounded and led to a passion for serving those who would need special attention--to be welcomed, to be understood, and to find a home in the Catholic church in America. When I first moved here, whenever I would enter a church, I felt instantly at home, knowing someone was there to welcome me and to listen to me. I knew that He was in the tabernacle. Teaching psychiatric nursing to nurse graduates from foreign countries also gave me the best initial preparation to minister to immigrants in America.

When I was asked to work in the ministry, I accepted it in a heartbeat. I brought all of my self with me--my imperfections, to be sure, but also the nurses' prayer that kept me grounded, and the experience that helped me to better understand those who would need that special attention, who sought a home in the parish, in the church where I too, found welcome, consolation and a listening ear. I found a personal relationship with God through them. The ministry that I love and enjoy has become my frame of reference for a fully integrated life, my vocation.

In my over 25 years of work, some things have struck me. In ethnic ministries, there have been numerous “a-ha!” moments, where I discovered the beauty of God’s creation in everyone, and how God has touched each one. I have been privileged to witness their journeys, what God means to them, how they forge their faith experiences in a new church, a new environment where they are strangers, and how they navigate the new culture, struggle to meet its expectations, and find meanings once again, how they endeavor to integrate into a culture that’s different from their own –and stay whole all the while. My task, our task, is to determine: how do we welcome them, how do we give them hope?

As one who served in management of health care, we were expected to be ready with answers to any and all problems posed to us. I felt obligated to bring these skills into the ministry until a priest with good intentions admonished me that, no matter how much we plan, God is the ultimate decision-maker and He has the final say. There was wisdom in what he said. No matter how talented we are, we should never forget that God is the source of those talents. We must humble ourselves, to be able to discern and to reflect on what the Holy Spirit is trying to tell us. We may not always be able to accomplish all that we plan to do because of the realities that confront us.

If there is one thing that has characterized my years of ministry, it is change. Narratives have changed from the melting pot theory to the salad bowl theory. The community of faith is more diverse. Immigration trends and the Internet Age add to this complexity. We have gone from being task-oriented to ecclesial, from a mindset of maintenance to one of mission.

How you respond to this ongoing change is your ministry.

And so, I have some points for your consideration:

- Amidst this sea of changes, and periods of confusion, what are those teachable moments, that inspire, encourage, motivate and enrich the ministerial life of those seeking ways to serve the Lord?
- How do we manage change, communicate and mentor people about the ultimate purpose and goal for that change and their support is valuable?
- How do we keep the passion and the meaning alive where change is constant?
- How do we catalyze the transformation of a work culture from one that has become more secular, more corporate, where mission no longer drives the priorities of an institution, into one that is spiritual and life-giving?

I would like to leave you with a story of an encounter with a newly-arrived group of refugees that I can’t forget. Communication was difficult because we needed translators. I noticed a few of them, huddled together, speaking in low tones, but sort of looking at me from the corners of their eyes. I asked what they were saying. And the translator said,

“They are begging you not to abandon them.”

Pray always that you minister to and care for others with dignity, strangers and friends alike, both those you love and those you struggle to love. Thank you.