

# WHY RIZAL: THE P

Hernando Abaya

Rizal's is a mind in lively ferment, a mind that doubts. The young mind exposed to Rizal's writings is stirred. It begins to question, to doubt. And it does not rest until it has resolved this doubt, or satisfied its curiosity. It is never the same again. Right there is the motivation we look for in the young. A stone is laid, later to become a part of the edifice. And one can hope, even the closed mind can be unlocked; the confused can be put at ease, and set aright. In the end, all these will come, it is hoped, with an understanding of Rizal.

The teaching of the Rizal course in the University of the Philippines is something of a coveted assignment. It is not only stimulating but rewarding as well. For here one explores and ranges wide over little-tapped native areas of the humanities and the social sciences, from art and literature to politics, history, and philosophy. And, whenever

he pauses to explore and examine, he always discovers something new and fresh and challenging — things that may seem old only because we tend to associate them with Rizal and his times, and yet have a refreshingly new meaning for us because, in Rizal's facile pen, the dark past becomes alive and reaches into the indifferent present to infuse new vigour into a lethargic society of confused values and even more confused thinking.

What is unusual is not so much the big number of faculty members who want to teach the course as the diversity and range of their many fields of discipline. Among them you find scholars and students of philosophy, of history, of sociology, of political science, of economics, of literature; a Japan scholar, a zoologist, and even writers and journalists. You have this array of diverse personalities. What a boon to the

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empiricists! You would expect a clash of interests, or surely of personalities, over so exciting albeit controversial (to people of a certain persuasion, at any rate) a topic as Rizal's writings. No. You have instead a happy blending of as independent-minded a group of professionals as you would find in any great center of learning. They may differ in their method of teaching or in their approach to the subject, but they each put into this course offering something of themselves that they share in common — their sense of national-consciousness that they see epitomized in the pervasive and dynamic Filipinism of Rizal. I might add, by way of digression, that one cannot be a "neutralist" or a "fence-sitter" in this course because by being neutral we would be saying that we are not taking sides with Rizal against a vicious clericalism and all its attendant evils which he fought to the death. This would be an unpardonable error.

It is this "hand-picking" of professors to handle the Ri-

zal course that the discredited star witness of the un-Filipino Perez Committee on Anti-Filipino Activities (CAFA) cited in her pathetically perjured bid not long ago to pinpoint an imagined communist infiltration in the University. We may perhaps grant she had a right to complain, but not for the reason she gave. As for the University — is it not merely being true to its mission as the people's own? Or dare anyone suggest that we leave the teaching of Rizal to the clerics and their acolytes?

Perhaps it is well to remind ourselves at this point that one of our goals is to establish a genuinely Filipino university. The Rizal course is a *must* to help achieve this goal. Our study materials — be they for English and the humanities, or for the social sciences — must have relevance to the Philippine scene. Nothing restores one's confidence in himself or in his country than the knowledge that he as a Filipino can also learn and create and produce like anybody else. The life of Rizal holds such promise

for us because we know that the one factor that convinced him to leave the country and go abroad was to study and show the world that the Filipino, given every opportunity for advancement, could equal, if not excel, any other people. He more than proved his point with his brilliant example. It cannot be stressed too often that we have to know more about ourselves, and the writings of Rizal will serve to open "the book of our past" and usher us into new horizons.

A lot of things are simple in a civilized society once we rid ourselves of the many silly and stupid abstractions that hide the economic truths of life. Rizal deals with realities, not with abstractions. His real value to us today is that his works are a mirror of the past. He makes us see our mistakes so that we may correct them. Flattery will only make us lower our guard. The study of his life is a study of a man in search of honor, dignity, freedom — for himself, for his people. And to a poor and weak people like us, these three things, and the will to fight for them, are everything. Not for one moment does Rizal make us forget this fact.

"We must secure liberty," the wise Father Flo-

rentino tells the dying, unrepentant Simoun, "by making ourselves worthy of it, by exalting the intelligence and the dignity of the individual, by loving justice, right, and greatness, even to the extent of dying for it."

He writes of a society in decay, a people in agony, a nation in pain.

Neglect of Rizal and his writings on the part of Filipinos, his heirs, will contribute to the intellectual decay that like a curse hangs heavily over his native soil. We cannot pretend to dictate the morals of our present-day society but it is not presumptuous to think that a knowledgeable acquaintance with Rizal's life and works will surely help to correct the evils that corrode our society today. For there is no more blinking the fact that, for all the superficial gloss of a crass modernism we affect in our western-inspired ways, our present-day society is not far removed from the capricious and morally and intellectually bankrupt society of Rizal's time.

It is, in fact, the same old alien-dominated society of the petty little despots, the *Kapitan Tiagos* and *Señor Pastas*, the *Doña Victorinas* and *Don Custodios*, that strut

like peacocks on Rizal's vast and sombre canvas. A society debased and degenerate wherein ignorance and arrogance rule because the modern counterparts of Rizal's little tin gods remain the makers of our tastes and the educators of our souls. At the top sits a privileged elite exuding the new morality — in C. Wright Mills' apt phrase, "the morality of hard cash and the fast buck"; — while most of us have become, as Archibald Macleish says, part of a mass. In other words, it is Ortega y Gasset's mass-man who has taken over society, this mass-man who drifts along, without a purpose in life, to whom the world has become a paradise without a trace of former footsteps; a society without roots in the past and therefore without any sense of tradition, of culture; a society of drones good only for extinction!

A modern *filosofo* Tasio only lately removed from the Philippine scene — Claro M. Recto — exhorted us to retrace Rizal's footsteps, follow his lofty principles, take his noble life for a model, emulate his sacrifices for our motherland. This cannot be achieved, he said, unless his writings and the invaluable example of his life "reach all the people."

Yet, few of our educated men, who are our leaders, have really read Rizal, and fewer still seem to understand him. The scholar T. H. Pardo de Tavera noted the same sad fact in an earlier period. One has only to inquire into the desultory, almost hostile, manner in which our "best" non-secular schools and universities are implementing the Rizal Law to realize why this is so. The result is, as Recto said, we have not only neglected but disregarded Rizal's teachings and are wittingly offering ourselves to a total foreign domination. "Already we are allowing our minds, our beliefs, our economic life to be enslaved." Was not one of Rizal's most valuable admonitions, Recto asked, that we should not behave as if we were strangers in our own land? "If we analyze our present situation," he said, "we shall find the very opposite of what he had advised. We are indeed like strangers in our own country!" Many of us today are Rizalist, he used to tell friends, but only when the time comes to honor and remember Rizal. "Patriotism is a means of livelihood and growing rich while in those times it brought poverty if not ignominious death!"

Yet, who listened to this noble spirit? "In the peculiar

and perverse structure of our world," Carmen Guerero Nakpil writes bitingly in a eulogy of Recto, "to have supported Senator Recto in his ardent nationalism campaigns would have meant offending the Americans, annoying the Catholic hierarchy and other powerful Catholic organizations, losing one's job or election, forfeiting a scholarship or an important appointment, running the risk of ridicule, of excommunication or of being labelled a Communist and an atheist."

Let Recto do it, yes. Let's all applaud him, yes. Applause never hurt anyone. But they remained unmoved.

"The task of Rizal's persecutors did not end with his execution because," as de Tavera says, "they still had to kill the work of that spirit which they could not allow to survive." One may here speculate that perhaps the friars could have forgiven Rizal for his political tirades against their social order but not for his frontal assault on their economic dominance and power. For the government then was merely the arm, the head was the *Convento*. "Our power will last as long as it is believed in," an old friar tells a young one just in from Spain in *Noli Me Tangere*. "And when we cease to be

rich, we shall no longer be able to control consciousness." "It is no longer fanaticism that builds this opulence," writes Marcelo H. del Pilar in *La Soberanía Monacal*; "It is fear of a group which has been raised to power which, with one stroke of the pen or a low whisper can kill the happiness of one who obstructs or does not cooperate in the development of its schemes of exploitation."

Ignorance deprived the Filipino of his dignity, and with dignity gone, went also his moral strength. Thus, says Rizal, you also make the Filipino useless even for those persons who wish to make use of him. "They have dazzled him with tinsel, with strings of colored glass-beads, with noisy rattles, shining mirrors, and other gewgaws, and he has given in return his gold, his conscience, and even his liberty."

But even Rizal's most sanguine detractors today can do only so much — to harm his name. They may even disrespect him, as some do, and make his out to be the author of harmless tales instead of a devastating critic of an insufferable social order. In the long run, nothing can really kill the work of that great spirit than the apathy and neglect and the ignorance of

his own people for whom he sacrificed all. It was that ignorance that succeeded in getting Rizal "deported, imprisoned, and murdered," to quote de Tavera again — "that ignorance which he fought, which we go on fighting, and which generations after us will still have to fight."

We can chart a course for our people only if we have the historical imagination that comes from a knowledge and understanding of our past. We will then have that sense of historic daring to experiment with change. And we can make a clean break with our colonial past and really get to know the feeling of new beginnings and ending the old evils. These latter we must learn to ferret out in their subtle new guises.

Make no mistake about it. A society that looks on with bemused cynicism at the rape of a democratic tradition in what was intended to be a political convention to pick the best man for the country is a society in decay. A society that permits, even secretly applauds, the contemptible antics of an unprincipled politician — and unintelligent intelligence men — who smears a great university and its professors by vile and malicious gossip, and cloaks a re-

negate informer with immunity to libel and harass a respectable scientist, is a diseased society, rotten to the core. A society that abandons its vaunted prerogatives of free inquiry to inquisitorial legislative bodies is a society that has turned its back on the adventure of freedom, and inexorably treads the ignoble road to stagnation and death. The cancer has already produced a general paralysis one can readily recognize by its manifest symptoms — expediency, conformity, escapism, intellectual servility, sectarian bigotry.

These are the old evils Rizal fought because they shackled the human mind and spirit. They all stemmed from ignorance or, in de Tavera's apt term, "obscurantism," which Professor Yabes has with reason now qualified as "organized obscurantism" which is "more insidious" than the old one. I will go a step farther. The fight Rizal fought is not only not yet over, but is being fought all over again, as in Rizal's time. And it has to be fought more vigorously and more intelligently, and without letup, if it is to be won.

In this centenary of Rizal's birth, his is the voice of our national conscience speaking from the grave to remind us

how far we have strayed from the path of truth and decency he and our other heroes had charted for us. What sense of shame must fill us today as old Tasio pours out, with damning reproach, this bitter truth:

"Our youth think only of love affairs and dissipations; they expend more time and work harder to deceive and dishonor a maiden than in thinking about the welfare of their country; our women, in order to care for the house and family of God, neglect their own; our men are active only in vice and heroic only in shame; childhood develops amid ignorance and routine, youth lives its best years without ideals, and a sterile manhood serves only as an example for corrupting youth.

Gladly do I die!"

May I now put in a word of caution. There is the danger that in our enthusiasm to propagate the teachings of Rizal we may tend to "type" him, that is, institutionalize him and convert his teachings into dogma. We have a well-known propensity to live by slogan. The fund-raising drive of the Rizal Centennial Commission has lately taken

the form of a slogan contest of the cheapest Madison Avenue variety. Many ride around smugly in their cars with *Live the Rizal Way* stickers on their windshields. And soon, this infantile gimmick, a *March of Joses for Jose* to keep the coins rolling into the till. One does not become a Rizalist this way any more than wearing a barong tagalog makes one a nationalist. Slogans may help win popularity contests, and may even help elect a president (Magsaysay is My Guy). But it is hardly the way to make our people conscious of Rizal and what he means to us in terms of national self-respect, of national dignity, and of the national soul. A Rizal cult will surely be the Judas kiss for a nascent Rizalism.

We cannot read Rizal toady and remain unmoved. But let us not read him as something the doctor ordered, like a sacred or tribal duty. And let us not read him with awe. This, as a candid Rizalist says, would be fatal. Rather, let us read him as we would any book find, and thrill to a new discovery. For Rizal re-read is Rizal discovered. We will then get to know him well, and learn from him the simple truths, and the little virtues. Those things that we

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