



National Ecumenical Forum for Filipino Concerns - Inland Empire (NEFFCON-IE)

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
MARCH 29, 2019
REFERENCE: NEFFCON-IE
EMAIL: profhalili@sbcglobal.net

A STATEMENT OF SOLIDARITY FROM NEFFCON-IE on the recent arrest of Catholic Priest Fr. Arturo Joseph Monzon-Balagat and Peace Consultant Renante Gamara

**“When the church hears the cry of the oppressed, it cannot but denounce the social structures that give rise to and perpetuate the misery from which the cry arises.”
(St. Oscar Romero)**

The National Ecumenical Forum for Filipino Concerns – Inland Empire (NEFFCON-IE) strongly condemns the continuing harassment and red-tagging of church leaders, members of the clergy and church workers serving the poor, the marginalized and the indigenous peoples in the Philippines.

The most recent victim of this political and religious persecution is our beloved Fr. Arturo Joseph Monzon-Balagat. Fr. Art emigrated from the Philippines and was incardinated in the Diocese of San Bernardino, California in 1991. In 2009 Fr. Art returned to Imus, Cavite, Philippines (where he was ordained in September 1975) to devote and personally take care of the well-being of his elderly and ailing adoptive mother and auntie. In the 10 years that he has been in the Philippines, he continued his pastoral care, not only building relationships with peoples from all walks of life but also building hospital and home care facilities, as well as forming a cooperative to serve the people, especially the poor and the marginalized. On the evening of March 20, 2019, Fr. Art and longtime friend and peace consultant Renante Gamara were arrested by combined elements of the Special Action Force (SAF) and the Philippine Army based on trumped up charges of illegal possession of firearms and explosives. Due to the quick assistance of paralegals and lawyers, Fr. Art was released Monday night March 25. The case was dropped due to insufficiency of evidence. As of this writing, Mr. Gamara still remains in custody.

Many of us in the Inland Empire know Fr. Art. He was inexhaustible; he faithfully, loyally, and zealously served the Universal Church. In 1993, at the direction of the Diocese of San Bernardino Bishop Most Reverend Gerald R. Barnes, Fr. Art together with Fr. Romeo Seleccion, MS, convened an Ad Hoc Committee to form the Diocesan Filipino Ministry; Fr. Art became the Ministry’s first Director in 1994. Among the parishes he served as Pastor are St. Mel’s (Norco, CA), St. George (Ontario, CA), St. Ann (Needles, CA) and St. Anthony (San Jacinto, CA).

Fr. Art’s love of peoples and cultures, and his passion to serve the poor, the marginalized and the indigenous of different cultures gave him strength of mind, body, soul and spirit to extend his pastoral leadership beyond his parish. He was among the convenors of various non-profit organizations including, but not limited to, the National Alliance for Filipino Concerns (NAFCON) and the National Ecumenical Forum for Filipino Concerns (NEFFCON). Fr. Art served as President of the National Asian and Pacific Catholic Organization (NAPCO) and, together with the leadership of the Asian and Pacific communities, organized the 2006 National Asian and Pacific Catholic Convocation in Virginia, USA. Fr. Art’s invaluable leadership was also demonstrated during his term as President of the US Filipino Catholic Ministries Council (USFCMC) from 2006 – 2008, and while serving as one the National Consultants to the US Conference of Catholic Bishops/Pastoral Care of Migrants and Refugees (USCCB/PCMR).

Fr. Art and Mr. Gamara's arrest is not an isolated case. During the first half of 2018, three Catholic priests – Fr. Richmond Nilo, Fr. Mark Ventura and Fr. Marceino Paez were assassinated within a span of six months. In April 2018 the 71-year old Australian missionary Sr. Patricia Cox, NDS, who has served the poor and indigenous peoples in the Philippines for 27 years, was illegally arrested and detained. Sr. Fox was accused of “participating in political activities and speaking against the government.” Thereafter, her valid missionary visa was not renewed by the Philippine Bureau of Immigration and Deportation (BI&D). In February 2019, just barely a month ago, the National Council of Churches in the Philippines condemned the accusation that Bishops Felixberto Calang and Antonio Ablon of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente (IFI) were “terrorist members of the New People’s Army and the Communist Party of the Philippines”.

The list of human rights violations under President Duterte’s administration continues to mount and escalate. From illegal arrests and detention, to forced evacuations, bombings of communities, and extrajudicial killings; the number of victims has reached more than 955,000 Filipinos. Not only has Duterte’s administration so brazenly and callously trampled on the dignity and rights our fellow Filipinos, he has also made derogatory remarks against Catholics and their faith. The President of the Philippines has called God “stupid”, cursed Pope Francis and said that bishops who criticize him and his war on drugs should be killed. In retort, Diocese of Lingayen-Dagupan Archbishop Socrates Villegas urged Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte “to stop the verbal persecution of the Catholic Church because such attacks can wittingly embolden more crimes against priests.”

“In the face of suffering or violence, poverty or hunger, corruption or abuses of power, a Christian can never remain silent.” (Pope Benedict XVI, March 17, 2009) It is time for all of us to speak out and denounce the injustices being perpetrated by the Duterte regime! We must have “An authentic faith – which is never comfortable or completely personal – always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it.” (Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 182) Not even President Duterte can demand that religion should be relegated to the inner sanctum of personal life, without influence on societal and national life, without concern for the soundness of civil institutions, without a right to offer an opinion on events affecting society.

We Call on All People of Faith to Denounce the Countless Abuses of Human Rights by the Duterte Administration!!! Stop Church Persecution!!

“A church that doesn’t provoke any crises, a gospel that doesn’t unsettle, a word of God that doesn’t get under anyone’s skin, a word of God that doesn’t touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed, what gospel is that? ...The gospel is courageous; it’s the good news of him who came to take away the world’s sins.” (St. Oscar Romero, April 16, 1978)

The National Ecumenical Forum for Filipino Concerns (NEFFCON) is an organization comprising of people of faith who believe in the dynamic presence and integration of Filipinos and Filipino-Americans in the US Church and society. This is demonstrated by a deep, and liberating solidarity relationship between the Filipinos, the Filipino-Americans and people of different cultures and the progressive organizations and people in the Philippines in their struggle for justice, peace, human rights, and integrity of creation. This vision is inspired by the Love of God and Service to the People, where faith is seen as a river of life that nurtures legitimate struggles and inter-human relationships.

“You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created, till iniquity was found in you. In the abundance of your trade, you were filled with violence, and you sinned; so I cast you as a profane thing from the mountain of God, and guardian cherub drove you out from the midst of the stones of fire. Your heart was proud because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendour. I cast you to the ground; I exposed you before kings, to feast on their eyes on you. By the multitude of your iniquities, in the unrighteousness of your trade you profaned your sanctuaries; so I brought forth fire from the midst of you; it consumed you”. Ezek 28,15-18