



Obituary

SR. MARY SYLVESTER MARPA, OSB

July 24, 1927- March 17, 2006

MANA ELDA, that was how she was respectfully called by her siblings, nieces and nephews. MISS MARPA, that was how she was addressed by her students at Holy Cross Academy, Carigara, Leyte and students of SSC, Manila while she was a postulant. SR. MARY SYLVESTER, that was how she was strictly named by the sisters, parents, faculty and co-workers. SR. SYLVER, that was how she was fondly called by members of her community. RAMBO or SYLVESTER STALLONE, that was how she was baptized by those who found her exacting.

Mana Elda lost her father while her mother was still in her thirties. "Your father is gone. Since you are the eldest, you must help me in disciplining all your six siblings." Mana Elda took this admonition to heart. Through her stature, her stare, her folded arms, the shape of her mouth, the raising of her brows, her younger brothers and sisters knew that Mana Elda meant business, no ifs, no buts for she was there with them as "father" of the family.

After finishing high school and college at the University of the Philippines, Criselda Marpa returned to her hometown, Carigara. With her impressive scholastic background, she could have stayed in Manila and gotten a good-paying job. Criselda said no to the city life, no to a teaching profession in any prestigious school. For her taking care of her mother and six siblings were more important than anything else in this world.

Back in Carigara, she taught at the newly-opened branch school, Holy Cross Academy, where all her six siblings became her own students. No special treatment was given to them. Archimedes, her brother, intimates, "Like other students, we were not spared from her scoldings. In fact we were the first to be scolded before our classmates." Her sister Boden elaborates, "I asked her to enroll me in piano. However, I had to pay the price. During the field demonstration, I played the wrong key. For this she reprimanded me before the whole student body."

Sr. Mary Sylvester was strict to the maximum. Her siblings would cry "foul"... but only to themselves. She would cry, too, but with this eternal refrain, "I was tasked to discipline you since our father died. This is for your own good."

When almost all of her brothers and sisters finished schooling, she had to listen to the yearnings of her heart. She was inspired by Sr. Aida Villareal, OSB to enter the convent. All the other German sisters who were in Carigara did not doubt her vocation. In fact, Sr. Florencia Ladurner, OSB wrote in her letter of recommendation for her entrance to the convent, "she is one of my best teachers, a perfect leader in handling the boys of the third and fourth year. She is also an excellent physical education teacher for the girls. It will be difficult to find someone to replace her. She has a good character and was a daily communicant. The reverend father will miss her too, she is his best legionary."

Mana Ilda entered at the age of 29 and became Sr. Mary Sylvester. To students in all the schools where she was, she was a formidable figure. The sight of Sister standing at the end of the corridor or walking by the classroom brought the students to a hush. Her insistence on punctuality: punctuality in coming to school, in submitting reports and projects on designated deadlines, exactness in following the school dress code - skirts below the knee were not just externals for external order sake. All the regimentation that she imposed and the corresponding punishment for transgressions of rules like standing along the corridor or sending out students from the classroom were meant to form the inner person: to make them women and men of character. That explains her insistence on fairness and honesty. NO FAVORITISM.

One time her brother Archimedes took along Sister Mary Sylvester to the Department of Agrarian Reform to serve as a back-up for his wife who was due for promotion. Archimedes, aware that her Mana Elda, who was now Sr. Mary Sylvester, knew the Director of the DAR was confident that his wife would get the long due promotion. Sr. Mary Sylvester put her foot down and said, "I will not intercede for your wife. Your children are more important than the promotion." Archimedes could also have been promoted as a judge. Again Mana Elda insisted that promotion would bring parents away from the children and break down families due to out-of-town assignments.

Despite the hard discipline that she imposed, Sr. Mary Sylvester was loved by her siblings, students and the teachers. For, behind the formidable figure, behind her seeming iron hand, she had a heart that was tender, compassionate and welcoming, a heart that embraced the misery and pain of anyone who came to her for a personal talk and guidance in difficult and trying times.

Well-read and well-informed on various fields of interest, she gave lectures and retreats to varied groups of people. What was striking is that in the last months of her life, she became pensive. When asked why she was quiet, she just said, "I want to listen." In the last months of her life, especially in the months of intense physical pain due to cancer of the breast, she must have drunk from the waters of our Lord's passion and there is where she got her strength and courage to accept the cross of pain.

She died on March 17, 2006 and was buried on March 21, a fitting day to commemorate the passing away of St. Benedict.

M. Mary John Mananzan, OSB
Manila Priory