

Sleeping inside a mausoleum

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BARILI - I spent my All Saints' and All Souls' Days in this progressive town on the invitation of my friend Jay Ruiz for the blessing and inauguration of his family's mausoleum. In fact, I was here since Saturday and I stayed overnight. It was my first time to sleep inside a mausoleum.

It was not scary because it felt like being inside a hotel room. Jay bought a piece of property adjacent to the town's public cemetery and developed it into a high-end mausoleum. It has an air-conditioned room, comfort room with shower and a rooftop. It's like a chapel in a first-class funeral parlor or a condominium unit. Diri ko nangalag sa Barili.

But do you know who blessed the Ruiz's mausoleum? The controversial Fr. Benedicto "Ben" Ejares, who is now assigned as a member of the team ministry of St. Anne parish, the town's patron saint. Fr. Ejares became controversial a few years ago after several female students of Abellana National High School complained that the priest "sexually harassed" them during a confession.

When the issue broke out in the media, then Cebu Archbishop Ricardo Cardinal Vidal "punished" him by not giving him a parish assignment. He was on floating status for several years until he was assigned in Consolacion and now in Barili. I was one of those who lambasted him. Last Saturday, though, we didn't get a chance to talk since he immediately left after the blessing.

Jay's parents died in the US after their car was hit by a twister in 2000. They were on their way to Las Vegas, Nevada from LA. The incident also claimed his sister-in-law. They died on the spot. Their car was totally wrecked. His elder sister and another sister-in-law survived. The incident was well covered by international media, including Cable News Network (CNN).

Jay's mother had a premonition of the fatal incident. Days before, she wrote a letter to her children telling them how much she cared for them and loved them. They received the letter a few days after the incident. The letter is now inscribed beside their tombs inside the mausoleum. If you read it, you will be touched and you feel emotional.

The observance of the two-day holiday here was generally peaceful. More people visited the tombs of their loved one last Saturday than yesterday.

The traffic along the cemetery and in the highway was well managed because of the presence of the town's policemen and tanod volunteers. No less than the town's chief of police Julius Ompad personally directed traffic.

A lot of people in the provinces still practice the old tradition when observing All Saints' and All

Souls' Days. Some still observe the novenas and prepare food for visitors as if they are having a fiesta celebration. They also offer their departed loved ones' favorite food in the altar. But eventually, it's the living who get to eat the food. That's why we can sometimes ask if indeed there is a soul. Observing the occasion is like a reunion and a bonding moment for family members.

I met Ma'am Susana "Echie" Alquisalas, secretary of the Cebu Provincial Federation of Senior Citizens' Association, at the Ruiz mausoleum. Mrs. Alquisalas, 88, is a retired school teacher. She expressed lament about the plight of senior citizens in the province because they are not given financial assistance by their local government units and the Provincial Government unlike in Cebu City.

She said she understands that LGUs have limited resources and can't afford to give them financial assistance. But some LGUs do provide them with livelihood projects. She hopes the National Government will give them assistance in their twilight years. I read in the paper that the Provincial Board is entertaining the idea of providing financial assistance to the elderly, like Cebu City does. I hope this will materialize.