

Am I Still Married To a Priest?

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"So you are married to Fr. Ed dela Torre!" is the usual reply when people discover my marital status. I kept my name when I got married and so people do not immediately associate me with Ed who is popular in national and international circles as a liberation theologian, a rebel priest (tagged by the military as dangerous during the martial law years, 70s and 80s in the Philippines) and an artist.

After taking stock of my qualities, people then would ask if Fr. Ed is still a priest or an ex-priest. They would pitch their questions in such a way that I would take refuge in a mental balcony. I used a standard line that my marital life was a special agenda. Only very close friends can get me to share the intimate details. But that was in the early 80s when I was struggling with inner fire and starting out on a feminist path.

After twenty-four years of activist involvement, half with the liberation movement, half with the feminist movement, my attitude to the same questions is much more relaxed and open. In fact, it is timely to engage in long conversations with friends and those who care to share insights on marriage, love, spirituality, religion, reincarnation and divine grace.

Why did I marry Ed who is a Catholic priest? I seldom hear this question except from my family. The usual question is: "Why did Fr. Ed marry Girlie?" but people get embarrassed addressing this to me and so they would ask Ed instead.

Theologically, Ed is still very much a priest. That's why my parents were quite relieved

when he asked for their blessings. My parents had always wanted a priest-son as none of my six brothers had joined the fold. So when I presented my parents with a candidate - Ed - in 1986 after he was released from political detention by people power, he was more than what they had dreamed of.

I still remember my mother crying when Ed formally asked my parents if he could marry me. I thought she was afraid of losing me but when she blurted out "Oh Ed! Girlie does not cook, sew clothes, wash or iron, she is not domesticated and will never be. She is used to going wherever she wants to go and I am really embarrassed to tell you this." I was quite entertained! Ed gallantly responded: "I know all that."

My mother offered to take care of all the preparations for the wedding. We suggested a brief civil wedding with just my family because Ed was honest about his own mother being still unsupportive. So the wedding took place soon after with my mother on top of everything, from waking up the government official who would give us the license and fetching the judge. It was half-past midnight on St. Isidro's feast when we signed our marriage license.

Soon after, the coup d'etat started in 1986 and Ed and I had to go overseas. Life abroad had its high and low moments. We lived in London and worked with many Irish and British



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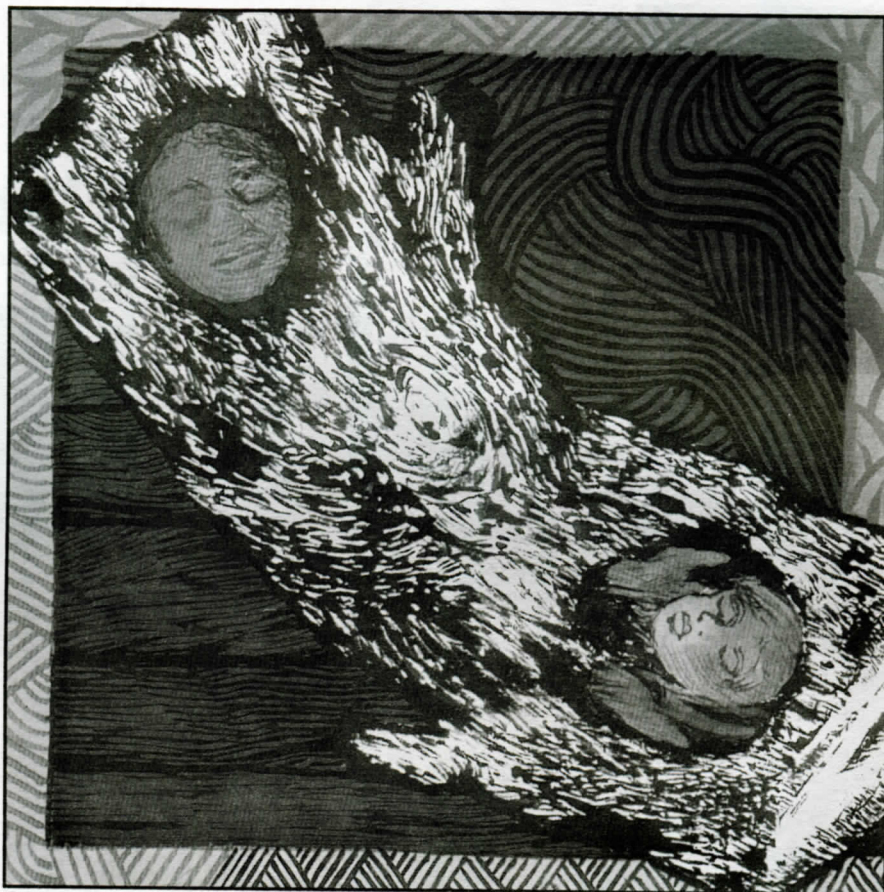
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solidarity workers. Some of them were priests and nuns fond of theology discussions. Ed kept urging me to join them in their conversations, hoping I would get keen on feminist theology. Sometimes, I would listen but I preferred to read eco-feminism. I was attracted to the spirituality that eco-feminists were writing about. I wondered how my life energies brought me to stages of growth and what links women have with nature.

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Sometimes, I would ask Ed if he was still a Catholic and he would smile and respond with *"I am a Filipino Christian in communion with Rome."* Then I would ask again if he was still a priest and in his engaging way he explains *"According to Catholic theology, a priest is a priest even if he ends up in hell."* I also would point out that he does not seem to pray and if he ever does, in what form? One time, I heard him saying that a person who was particularly opportunist will get the karma she deserves. I did not know that he believed in karma. I only know that he does not think about the after-life. Ed lives in the present and finds affinity with the philosophy of the Danish philosopher *Grundtvig* of educating people for this life. I believe that there is a current that provides the spine of life in this world and in other levels, that some form of life exists after our bodies die, and that somehow all our spirit, individually or collectively, lives on by taking other challenges.

Our formative and tempering years have unique and common features. Ed spent over ten years in the seminary, another nine and a half in political detention. I grew up



Original artwork by Edicio dela Torre

in a secular school and spent only a month in detention; the next two decades were spent organizing youth, teachers-educators, and women. I was reared in catechism, discovering the many saints who could intercede for me when I wanted favours from heaven. I became a devotee of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, observing Wednesday afternoon novenas and being grateful that I was consistently on the honor list, attributing my high grades to divine grace and not to my learning curve. I did entertain becoming a Carmelite nun or a Maryknoll sister during my primary years of schooling but lost it when I became attracted to boys, politics and social movements in the early '70s.

I first saw Ed one morning in June 1970 in our family dining room, talking to my father and brother. I was not even aware of his political stance and I casually listened to his lecture that day in the university where my father was Dean of

Liberal Arts. After a short visit, Ed became my spiritual and social guide, leading me to join the Khi Rho Youth organization, a Christian activist organization founded in the late '60s. Having a relationship was not on the agenda. Studying Marxism and Christianity with him was the order of the day. I learned many things during this stage and developed an activist stance on many issues.

My mother and I became embroiled in debates over religious practices and values. I preferred to go to serve-the-people brigades in the barrios on Sundays, but my mother wanted me to attend Sunday Masses. When she noticed that I was no longer praying the rosary with them every night, she became very agitated and we got into heated arguments about sin and grace. I told her that mass poverty in the countryside was a national sin and that our energies were better spent eradicating it rather than praying the sorrowful

mysteries. She and my father found it very painful to see their eldest daughter straying from the Roman Catholic path. I was quite energized with my discovering another path to enlightenment.

Later when martial law was declared in 1972, Ed recommended me to a group which was in charge of underground communications. I saw him only once in 1972 and then we took on separate tasks which led me to the inner circles of the Marxist-led movement for national democracy. I became another person with many names and identities, becoming adept at providing succour to the expanding circles of the movement. I wanted to become a 'red expert' who could 'play the piano with her ten fingers,' so I read the red book of Mao daily and cited quotations every time we held study meetings.

My involvement in the underground resistance movement sharpened my political sense and survival skills but dulled my psychic-sensual self. In the early martial law years (1972) there were trials conducted by the units to ferret out enemy

agents. Many mistakes were made and the unit I was part of lost so many people to the military that they put me under

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suspension. I was suspected of turning in members of my team. I had to get someone who could vouch for me. I sought Ed but he got arrested himself in late 1973. I had to defend myself and I proved that I could be trusted with difficult tasks in the legal movement, breaking ground with the middle forces. I took graduate courses in a Jesuit university to have the credentials to organize professional people in the academe. I learned new things during this stage.

I became more passionate and open. My relationships with women and men took on a resonance which I did not have when I joined the movement and survived the underground. This particular resonance expressed itself in my being able to read and touch people. I also began to have friends who were feminists, three women

who were my classmates in graduate school. Together with these three women, one Filipina, one British and another American, I became more aware of gender. We began to talk about our being women and why it was very important to

psychology. The term feminist psychology was not yet clear to me but these friends, taught me how to express myself sensually, sexually and politically. I learned from them attitudes and elements in sexuality, concerns which I would not have shared with my mother nor with comrades.

Also during this stage, I developed a sixth sense. I could listen with my body and hear things in the past. Sometimes, I could even see the immediate future, as if I would accidentally plug into a space where faces and events flow and fuse in one stream. I began to explore new ideas in sexuality, in intuition and sixth sense. These ideas gave my class studies a new dimension which further developed into class and gender questions. I started to describe women as luminous beings and I was fascinated with becoming luminous.

After earning my masteral degree in 1978, Ed and I met again during his Christmas pass (he was given permission by the military to visit his home for a day). We both wanted to renew ties and I started to visit him regularly in the military camp. We realized we were falling in love and started to enjoy each other.

I began showing him an expanding self which people were beginning to notice. My feminist ideas and my luminosity became my gifts to the relationship. I provided Ed with a new set of values that his formative years in the seminary did not give him. For instance, being partners meant organizing our money, time



Isis

Girlie

and resources so I could remain to be me, independent and capable of planning other lives other than what was charted for him by the movement. The leaders in the movement regarded Ed as a valuable propagandist and they charted his path, taking for granted that I would accept to go wherever they bid him to go.

Ever since I got married to Ed, I had to work against the stereotype of the wife assisting the husband with his tasks. I pointed out to the leaders that I had developed my skills in united front work, in education work and in finance work. I persuaded them to look at my political credentials but they were interested only in Ed. So Ed and I agreed to consult each other on what we would be doing together and individually. First were the tasks that we would take and where we would live. The first was negotiable with the movement. The second was decided by events and circumstances.

“I began to think our life would be based on a vow of charity and poverty”

When the Philippine government released Ed in 1980 on the condition that his order, the Society of Divine Word (SVD), send him to Rome for exile, I had to decide about living overseas. I did and we became very excited with travelling and working in international networks. We met many solidarity workers and learned many things about Western Europe. I met the women of **Isis International** in Rome and became friends with *Marilee Karl* and many European feminists. Ed and I were happy with the ambience that Catholic churches and museums provided to our relationship. The Society of Divine Word was not happy with Ed's politics and so he asked for a leave. We made love from Paris to Vienna, from Amsterdam to Stockholm, and were filled with the spirit inside the Vatican Museum. We travelled around Europe staining bedsheets to mark

our organizing activities.

Life with Ed has its quota of problems. One is how to earn and divide the money in such a way that there would be enough for our common needs and specific personal needs. I get anxious about money and I work on getting it but Ed has a very priestly attitude towards money: *“I attract money. It just comes to me.”* It does whenever we need it but it needs some managerial control because it comes and goes faster than church contributions. Ed is very generous and provides families with annual funds without any consideration of their repaying him. When we were living in Europe for the second time in the late eighties, he was supporting around three couples and their families and we were living on a small allowance because the work we got did not provide a salary. Ed became one of the most popular and 'cheapest' Third World theologians in Western Europe. Every event that needed

a South theologian brought him in and the organizations had to pay only for his train or plane ride. They seldom gave him money for his talks. When I gave birth to Ayen, our daughter, we got her clothes and beddings from relatives and friends; many were hand-me-downs because we could not afford them. I began to think that our life would be based on a vow of charity and poverty.

When we were able to return home in 1992, he went fund-raising for programs and still did not take any salary. People have gotten so used to his being generous, of his mind, his time and even the hospitality of our family that they will not take the first step in offering him payment. So I tried convincing him to charge financially for consultations, etc., but I have yet to hear him say or inquire *“I want*

to know how much are your rates.” His standard line is *“I don't ask for money and I don't refuse money.”*

Childcare is another agenda. Ed does not take to children as he does to adults who are interested in politics, economics and theology. Once I asked him why he was not eager to take charge of baby-sitting for friends. He responded: *“Children think differently and I do not have the training to deal with them.”* Ed loved our daughter from the moment she was born (he assisted me in birthing and he personally cut the umbilical cord) yet he finds it very stressful to care for her. It took me and Ayen together three years to train him to be a good father. At this very moment, he has been accompanying her to her pre-school classes and will see her through until she is ready to go by herself. I do claim the credit for having mapped out this path for him.

Our years together have been filled with many discoveries. I have learned to respect the discipline in thinking which Ed developed over the years because I used to be satisfied with swimming in the currents of thoughts, never developing the cerebral rigour and subjecting it to long discourses. Ed began to appreciate my thinking with my body and he was fascinated with my creative centering - using the psychic energies I developed as part of my feminist and spiritual awakening. People ask who is the more spiritual, Ed or I? I think we express it in different levels.

Having a child to rear makes one very conscious of what values to nurture. When Ayen asks *“Why do people die and when they die, what happens to them?”*, I am more open with her. I tell her the story of Ylang-Ylang who dies loving a man and when she is buried, a tree grows and the blossoms remind people of her, breathing with a fragrance that is uniquely hers. I am also active in teaching her to pray, in a form that shapes a positive attitude towards people and nature, encouraging



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Girlie and daughter Laraine, 1994

her to think well of her life with them. I veer away from promising her heaven and I will leave it to her to understand good and evil. What I do is point out to her the various sources of grace and good karma. Ed has not been as proactive as I am in this area.

Ed and I believe that priests and nuns should really allow themselves to be sensuous because it makes them whole.

We shared this value with many couples who were priests married to ex-nuns, to nuns who were open to relationships and to women attracted to priests. There was a growing community of priests and nuns in the late seventies whose roles became flexible and pluralist. Being involved in social movements, they became more open to friendships, relationships and marriage. Many nuns became feminists and sought

friendships outside of the confines of the school and churches. Many relationships were formalized by the movement with revolutionary weddings.

In this environment, I met many nuns who were finding their way into feminism. One of them was *Sr. Mary John Mananzan* who

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gave me a book on the history of virginity and its value to the Catholic Church. With *Sr. Mary John*, I ventured into the organizing of women with a provocative gender orientation. This friendship with her opened many doors for me. I became more adept at building women’s formations, from resource centers to national networks.

I also became more critical of the practices of the Roman Catholic Church and became supportive of feminist education of women in the religious congregations. I began to see devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help in another context. I prayed in terms of the number of women I reached, supported, counselled and organized rallies with. My earlier practice of observing novenas was transformed in forming networks of sectoral women’s organizations. I still pray up to now, having more female images and spirits in my spiritual bank. When I became very ill, I summoned the help of female principles and goddesses, from the Filipino *Mebuyan*, the Egyptian *Isis* to the Christian *Mother of Perpetual Help*. I also occasionally pray to the force inside mountains, lakes and seas.

I am still influenced by a trinity. I married Ed three times, first in the movement, second in the government and third in church. I have made three journeys, through the Marxist path, the feminist trail, and the spiritual road. Clearly, the tempering elements to my marriage with Ed are my high self-esteem, my own life achievements and my own circles of friends. These trinities have given the relationship a dimension that keeps us learning together and increasing our appetite for living.

When Ayen grows up to be her own woman, I hope she will still find her-priest-father and feminist mother trail-blazing together, carving paths which she will want to explore herself and laughing with us. I also hope she will tell her friends and peers: *“I know why Fr. Ed is still married to Girlie.”*

Note: Ed says that celibacy is a disciplinary policy, not doctrinal and that married priests are still priests, theologically speaking. Celibacy was imposed on priests in the 12th century by the Council of Seville. ♀