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A Bishop Resigns

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A BISHOP RESIGNS

Bishop's Residence
Surigao

TO OUR DEARLY BELOVED PRIESTS, SISTERS AND ALL PARISHIONERS,
PEACE AND BLESSING FROM THE LORD.

Upon me rests the obligation, at the same time a pleasant privilege, to announce to all of you the great news, that the Holy Father has deigned to appoint on Jan. 10, 1973, a new Bishop for the Diocese of Surigao, in the person of Most Reverend Miguel Cinches, SVD.

This same fact implies that this letter should be considered as a farewell to you, and similarly an act of gratitude to all and each one of you for the sincere charity which you have always shown toward me, particularly for bearing with my shortcomings.

In order to forestall questions of "why and when" a short explanation may be in order:

According to the stipulations of Vatican Council II, a Bishop is advised to resign his position due to sickness or old age (at least at the age of 75). While these circumstances would not apply to me, it must be admitted that on account of particular conditions there may be other valid reasons which should induce a Bishop to vacate his office and give room to a successor.

The first consideration which led me to approach the Holy Father on the matter of a successor, (first in April 1967, and again in July 1971) was the indigenization of the Philippine Hierarchy. It has always been my conviction that missionaries from foreign lands should continuously keep in mind that they are emergency forces, perforce needed to establish the church in a native land, but always on the lookout to define the proper time for turning over responsibilities to the sons of the land.

In my estimate that time had certainly come in 1967, a period when it was evident from the appointments of young bishops in Mindanao, that the Holy See was gradually centering her mind on the Filipinization of the hierarchy. In close succession Filipinos were appointed to Cagayan, Dipolog, Davao, Cotabato, Malaybalay, Butuan. When my first appeal was turned down, a second approach was made four years later.

There were other reasons: While in years past, the far greater majority of our priests were foreigners, steadily a change had been taking place. As the ratio now stands, we have in the diocese of Surigao 19 foreign priests as against 18 Filipinos. And what makes the situation more pointed: most of the foreigners are getting on in age, while the Filipinos form the younger generation. And to clinch the argument: there will be no more priests forthcoming from other countries; all the eventual increase will have to be a growth from within. It would simply be right to grant to this young growing Filipino clergy a man taken from their midst. For all these reasons it seems imperative that the Bishop should be a Filipino. It would not do for a foreigner to hang on to an office, where it is evident that someone from the Philippines can do a better job.

We need not progress further into the list of good reasons for resigning a position, although, of course, there are several more. The two reasons given are of such paramount importance that just by themselves they would suffice. They center upon the supreme importance of the church, and in comparison to the church all further considerations of a personal nature should fade.

When is this turn-over to take effect? Canon Law decrees that someone appointed to the episcopacy must be consecrated and take possession of his diocese within the course of three months. That is therefore the latest term; it may be earlier, entirely at the discretion of the Bishop elect. What should be therefore uppermost into the mind of the former Bishop is to "go packing" and stand ready to leave at any notice.

Needless to say, that it will be hard for me to leave the diocese of Surigao, the field where I was allowed to work all the 35 years of my ministry. The rest of my life will be spent in some Visayan-speaking diocese, where I might still do some little good.

But the pain which this separation will cause, will be more than compensated by the consolation I find in entrusting you to the care of a Bishop, whom you can really call your own, being of the same color and blood. By this act I consider the goal of my missionary endeavor achieved, because the core of a missionary assignment is: "work to make yourself superfluous."

In parting I wish and pray to the Lord, that the administration of your incoming Bishop will carry you to ever greater heights. Love him and support him as you did me.

With fatherly blessing to all,

(SGD) Charles van den Ouwelant, MSC
Bishop of Surigao

Given in Surigao,
January 12, 1973.