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Rev. Joseph A. Galdon, S.J.
1928–2010

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Obituary

Rev. Joseph A. Galdon, S.J. 1928–2010

It was on an ordinary June afternoon in 1970 when Fr. Joseph A. Galdon, S.J., came into our lives. He strode into the classroom at Berchmans Hall, placed a wooden statuette of a carabao on the teacher's desk, and said: "Gentlemen, that's not your teacher." But if there was an animal that could represent Father Galdon's readiness and tenacity, hard work, and patience, it would be the beloved animal of his adopted country. *The carabao was not the teacher, but the teacher was a carabao.*

The late 1960s and early 1970s were troubled—therefore, exciting—times in the Philippines and in the Ateneo de Manila. The groundbreaking "Down from the Hill" article appeared in *The Guidon* in 1969 crystallizing the Filipinization movement, and it was not a pretty time to be an American administrator in the university. At that time, Father Galdon was dean of the College of Arts and Sciences (1968–1970) and he resigned to give way to a Filipino dean. He was appointed chairman of the Department of English, but even that concession was violently questioned by both students and faculty members. In spite of the protests, Father Galdon stayed on for a year (1970–1971) until he was appointed director of the Pre-Divinity Program (1972–1976) at the Loyola House of Studies. He was an old hand at this, having been Dean of Studies for the Jesuit scholastics from 1965 to 1968. He would serve once more as chairman of the Department of English—this time, without protests, violent or otherwise—from 1976 to 1978, and finally from 1984 to 1988. The newly established Interdisciplinary Studies Program (which absorbed the defunct Classical Studies and Philippine Studies programs) found an able first director in Father Galdon (1978–1982). It was during this stint that Father Galdon conceived and tried to implement the Great

Books Program (patterned after that of the University of Chicago) for the whole College of Arts and Sciences. As usual, Father Galdon led—but he was difficult to follow. The Great Books Program did not quite take on as originally planned (as a full-blown academic program of collegiate studies), but it has remained a permanent fixture within what would become the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies. While continuing to teach English and Great Books courses, Father Galdon became a full-time administrator from 1989 to 1995, serving as director of the Office of Admissions and Aid. This was his last service as an administrator in the School of Arts and Sciences.

Father Galdon's "carabao career" did not begin and end as a high-level university administrator. He was, above all, a teacher. He taught practically everything that had to be taught in a decent Department of English—from Composition and Rhetoric I to Chaucer, from Introduction to Poetry to The Metaphysical Poets, from Gerard Manley Hopkins to Philippine Literature in English. Because Interdisciplinary Studies had absorbed Classical Studies, he also taught Classical Epics and Classical Tragedy, with Classical Criticism (Plato, Aristotle, and Longinus) thrown in for good measure. He made *Beowulf*, *Piers Ploughman*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* bedtime reading for college undergraduates. A former student, Rev. Daniel Patrick Huang, S.J., now an ecclesiastical luminary in Rome, has written:

I think the title of a book by Robert Alter captures well what Father Galdon taught me: *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age*. Father Galdon was an unabashed humanist in his approach to literature. There were no ideological readings of literary works; no cultural studies-based analyses; no postcolonial deconstructions of the work of dead white males. In class, we read dead white males and dead white females, as well as living writers of different colors, and he always asked us to look for the SHE: the "Significant Human Experience"—not, heaven forbid, a "moral lesson," but what the work revealed about the grandeur and the misery, the complexity and the ambiguity of the human heart and human existence. And in the process, he showed us how to delight in the peculiar beauties of poem or play, essay or narrative. ("Three Gifts from Fr. Galdon: An Appreciation," *Philippine Jesuits*, 16 March 2010, online, <http://www.phjesuits.org/features/206-three-gifts-from-fr-galdon-an-appreciation>, accessed 6 Aug. 2010)

SHE was what mattered because SHE was what the study of language and literature was all about. The title of one of his favorite course offerings said it all: Literature and Ideas—where "ideas" were not simply abstract concepts but the very form or "deep structure" of significant human experience. Father Galdon did not need Heidegger to know that "language is the house of being" or that "Every thinking that is on the trail of something is a poetizing, and all poetry a thinking." He had learned those lessons from Homer and Aeschylus, Virgil and Dante; he had verified it even among modern writers like W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, or W. H. Auden. As a matter of fact, the transmission of SHE was to him what education was all about—*educere* ("to draw out") is also *tradere* ("to hand over"). Significant Human Experience was what would guarantee the continuities of tradition and education. Postmodern epistemological ruptures and metaphysical *Überwindungen* (Overcomings) were not Father Galdon's concerns; or, rather, he tended to see them healed and reconciled in the concrete decisions of daily living. To quote his beloved Yeats, in *The Circus Animals' Desertion*:

Now that my ladder's gone,
I must lie down where all the ladders start,
In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.

It was this Christian humanist vision of life and literature that informed his teaching and that made him so passionate about teaching teachers how to teach. The Ateneo Center for English Language Teaching (ACELT) was established in 1981 to "discover and share" SHE. Father Galdon expressed his "ideological" options in this manner: "We are interested in people and things that happen to students, things they experience and share. We are ultimately concerned not with turning out skilled proofreaders who can spot all the misplaced commas and spelling mistakes, but with turning out young people who can see, feel and think, and appreciate the world around them with all its smiles and tears" (Galdon, *Invention One: Discover and Share*, xi; Manila: Jesuit Educational Association, 1974; cited in *Golden Harvest: Essays in Honor of Joseph A. Galdon, S.J.*, edited by Susan P. Evangelista et al., [1]; Quezon City: Office of Research and Publications, Loyola Schools, Ateneo de Manila University). This passion became a project that took Father Galdon and the Galdon-trained to the four corners of the archipelago (and beyond), not just to spread the Good News of English Language and

Literature but, above all, to make thinking come alive and become fun. To reach more students, he reached out to teachers and made teacher-training his long-lasting legacy. Father Galdon was not blind to the issues of power behind language and literature; rightly or wrongly, he simply thought that learning English empowered and enriched a citizenry even in postcolonial times.

Readers of *Philippine Studies* will remember Father Galdon as its indefatigable associate editor (1966–1971, 1972–1983) and editor-in-chief (1984–2002). One Jesuit colleague commented: “He sacrificed some of his own scholarship to edit *Philippine Studies* . . . fostering the scholarship of others” (Thomas Steinbugler, S.J., Homily: “Good Night, Sweet Prince . . .” 18 March 2010, online, <http://www.phjesuits.org/features/214-good-night-sweet-prince>, accessed 6 Aug. 2010). Still, a number of book reviews and review articles were written (almost all of them dealing with works of Philippine literature in English), enough to be collected in two volumes: *Philippine Fiction* (1972) and *Essays on the Philippine Novel in English* (1979). The spirit animating Father Galdon’s criticism of Philippine literature in English was expressed thus: “Perhaps I am spelling out the obvious, but Philippine literature must be Filipino and must be in the true Philippine tradition” (Galdon, “Emigdio Alvarez Enriquez’s *Devil Flower*,” in *Philippine Fiction: Essays from Philippine Studies 1953–1972*, edited by Galdon, 211; Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press; cited in Isabel P. Martin, “Introduction [to Part III],” in *Golden Harvest: Essays in Honor of Joseph A. Galdon, S.J.*, edited by Susan P. Evangelista et al., 181). What constituted “the true Philippine tradition,” though, had yet to be defined. Another volume edited by Father Galdon grew out of a lecture series sponsored by the Department of English and the Interdisciplinary Studies Program of the Ateneo de Manila: *Salimbibig, Philippine Vernacular Literature* (1980). Besides being the only occasion for Father Galdon to delve into the realm of Philippine vernacular literatures, it was also the only occasion for him to anticipate (perhaps, unconsciously) one of the present directions of Philippine literary studies: “[T]he study of Philippine vernacular literature, at least in its origins and in its history, is as much a task of the anthropologist, the sociologist and the historian, as it is of the literary man. It has now become somewhat of a truism that Philippine literature is literature which reflects the Philippine sensibility. It has now become equally obvious that the Philippine sensibility can be found *only* in extensive research into the vernacular literature” (Galdon,

“Editor’s Preface,” in *Salimbibig: Philippine Vernacular Literature*, edited by Galdon, 3; Quezon City: The Council for Living Traditions; italics added). Who knows what the author of *Typology and Seventeenth Century Literature* (1975) could have done with a typological approach to Francisco Baltazar, Faustino Aguilar, or Lope K. Santos?

Finally, a short word about the secret Father Galdon. Someone else has already mentioned the fact that talking with Father Galdon led one to know more about oneself and almost nothing about Father Galdon. It must be because the intimate Father



Rev. Joseph A. Galdon, S.J., 1993
Source: *Guidon*, 26 Nov. 1993: 13,
courtesy of the *Guidon* archives

Galdon had to do with the Jesuit priest in him. He entered the New York Province of the Society of Jesus in 1946 and came to the Philippines in 1950 to study Philosophy and do regency at the Ateneo de Manila High School. In 1956 he went back to the United States to study theology at Woodstock College in Maryland; he was ordained a priest in 1959 and took his final vows as a Jesuit in 1963. He earned a doctorate in English and Comparative Literature from Columbia University in 1965 before returning to his adopted country. In the Philippine Province of the Society of Jesus, he assumed the responsibility for the initial intellectual formation of Jesuit scholastics (juniorate and philosophy) for several terms and was rector of the Jesuit community of the Ateneo de Manila University for many years. He founded the Prayer Days for Coeds for the first generations of women in the Ateneo de Manila and was a ready counselor or confessor for souls in need. His masses at the college chapel were well attended and his homilies were exemplary in their simplicity—even naïveté—of style and richness of gospel content. These homilies and similar writings were later on collected in a series entitled *The Mustard Seed* (1991), which was also the title of his long-running weekly column in a Manila newspaper. As a Jesuit priest, his ministry was as transparent as an imagist poem; what mattered was, in Ignatius of Loyola’s words, “to help souls”—and to help them wherever they were. This utter transparency to the

work of grace in the souls he met and cared for tells us something about the man's humility—of which the less said, the better. He was taken away from us, many years before he died; perhaps, that made the loss less painful but no less keenly felt.

The Jesuit confrere charged with pronouncing Father Galdon's funeral oration ended by quoting from Dag Hammarskjöld: "For all that is past, Thank you; for all that is future, Yes." Rev. Joseph A. Galdon, S.J., indeed could have said it, looking back on his life, at the threshold of illness and oblivion. Or maybe he would still quote that grand old man, W. B. Yeats, in *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*:

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart's core.

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