

Christmas with a dead man's watch

Fr. Roberto Reyes

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This article is an account of a well known Filipino priest, Fr. Roberto Reyes, whom a rebel group claiming responsibility to the murder of Colonel Rolando Abadilla had approached nine years ago. They handed over to him Abadilla's Omega watch as their evidence that they had killed him, not the five convicted accused. The court had accepted the watch but never considered Fr. Reyes' testimony.

It was an unusual Christmas. No one knew about what I had carefully hidden in my room. A few days earlier, I had unusual visitors. Members of the communist hit squad Alex Boncayao Brigade or ABB came to my office at the Parish of the Holy Sacrifice, at the University of the Philippines, Diliman, Quezon City. It was more than a friendly visit. They had a request which was a matter of life and death, a matter of justice and the grave possibility of its miscarriage.

I already met one of the ABB men who saw me. He was high ranking, well known and respected in the communist underground. The other men introduced themselves for the first time. "We will not take your time Father. We just came to make an urgent and serious request of you," uttered the leader. "We have here the watch of Colonel Rolando Abadilla," he explains. He then takes an envelope and opens it. He shows me a watch, an Omega watch. "This is Colonel Abadilla's watch. He was wearing it on the day that he died. He deserved to die for the crimes he committed against the people. The ABB carried out the execution of Abadilla. We carried out the execution and did not fail in acknowledging our responsibility for it. In fact, to this very day, we continue to insist that we killed Colonel Rolando Abadilla. We are indeed responsible for his death."

I looked at the watch. I looked hard and tried to sense what it represented, what it meant. The leader continued, "We would like you to keep this for awhile, until it is time to bring it out into the open. There are five innocent men accused of killing Colonel Abadilla. They are fall guys, conveniently and arbitrarily arrested to remove the political stigma from the death of Abadilla. You probably remember who and what he was during the Marcos era. He was known as the "Berdugo" (torturer) because he was the military's chief interrogator and torturer of political prisoners. He has worked with Marcos and with others who are now well placed in the political and military hierarchy. "

I stopped the leader and asked, "You mean that there are five men in prison for a crime that they did not commit?" He promptly answered, "Yes, five innocent men, and they are on death row waiting for affirmation from the Supreme Court. And you know what affirmation means. When their sentence is affirmed by the Supreme Court it will be carried out within the next three months."

This was indeed a sad and dangerous time in the Philippine justice and penal system. The death penalty had just been restored during the previous administration under President Fidel Ramos. The incumbent President, Joseph Estrada has been making open and fiery overtures about implementing capital punishment as soon as possible. Inmates on death row have begun feeling the torture of the fatal combination of presidential bravado and the blood lust of a growing pro-death penalty segment of the population. "Kailangang sampulan yang mga kriminal na yan (criminals have to be given a lesson through an example), was President Estrada's oft repeated and heard comment those days. Everybody felt and knew that executions will take place quite soon. And those who knew, though in a different, scarier and more existential way were those on death row, which included the five men falsely accused for Colonel Rolando Abadilla's murder.

“So, what exactly do you want me to do,” I asked the leader. “We want you to take this watch and keep it and when it’s time, perhaps early next month, present it to the Judge who convicted the five innocent men as new evidence to prove their innocence,” explained the leader. Then he added with a note of urgency, “These are five innocent men who will become victims of a grave miscarriage of justice if we do not act and do everything possible to have them re-tried and proven innocent. We are not exactly religious or spiritual persons. But we have consciences which urge us to do everything to save five innocent men and to reaffirm our responsibility for the justified execution of an enemy of the Filipino people.”

The meeting was over in less than an hour. The ABB men left and I sat in my office looking at this unusual object. I imagined what it would say if it could speak. But it lay before me in dead stillness. It did not speak. It did not tell time. I don’t remember what time it read then but I do recall that it had stopped functioning. The hour hand and minute hand were frozen at some time in the past. It was as though the watch had died with its owner as well. It was after all a dead man’s watch and worse, it was on his wrist when he was killed. I took the watch and wrapped it in paper and carefully hid it in a cabinet in my bedroom.

Colonel Rolando Abadilla’s watch stayed with me, watched me and in a very real and active sense challenged me to think long and hard about the realities of the Philippine justice system. At that time, five men who were arrested, accused and subsequently convicted of a crime they did not commit had already spent more than three years in jail. They were convicted and sentenced to death, a punishment whose implementation was just a matter of time. I had been given the watch of a victim of so-called “revolutionary justice.” Now the watch began to talk to me. It did not approve of its owner’s extrajudicial execution by those who condemned him as an “enemy of the people”. It also did not accept the exploitation of five innocent men who have become fall guys in order to reduce or erase the stigma of a political crime and have it degraded to something less.

If the watch could only speak and say more, I was ready to listen. In fact, I felt compelled to listen.

The following days were busy. There was the “simbang gabi,” the nine days novena masses at dawn before Christmas. I was busy and tired those days but the watch was a quiet, abiding presence, a question crying for an answer. The watch lay buried under my clothes. It was virtually invisible but an almost perceptible presence kept me awake and attentive at all times. No, it was not only the Colonel’s watch which kept me company. It was not only the dead Colonel’s spirit. It was also the voices of the living, innocent victims of a weak, defective, manipulated and controlled justice system.

I would take out the watch from time to time and look at it. I would ask it about its deceased owner and what it knew about him. I would invariably remember the first words of a Latin phrase, “res clamat...” (a thing cries out for its owner). But the watch cries for something more. It cries for truth and justice. I am sure that if the watch had eyes, it definitely would have seen what happened and know exactly who killed its owner. And so, I would also ask the watch what it saw on June 13, 1996. How many men approached the Colonel’s car? How many had guns and pumped several bullets into the Colonel’s body? Testimonies of alleged witnesses seem at variance and even contradictory. The watch could not err because it was there. Yes, if only the watch could speak... if only.

The nine days of novena masses went by. Christmas also came and went. No one knew that a dead man’s watch had kept me company. There were a few days of quiet and rest before the new year. There was time, more time to think, listen, pray and continue this unusual dialogue with a dead man’s watch.

The new year, the new millennium came. The watch and I welcomed the festive noise of fire crackers and toy trumpets. What aside from the new year were we in fact welcoming? I looked forward to a year of

truth and justice. I prayed for freedom and happiness for the unjustly accused and imprisoned. I know if the watch could only speak, the watch would also utter the same prayer and wish.

Early that January of the year 2000, the Colonel's watch finally left its temporary home. I took it to the sala of Judge Jaime Salazar of the Regional Trial Courts of Quezon City. Judge Salazar was the judge who convicted the Abadilla 5 and sentenced them to death. I was accompanied by lawyer Neri Colmenares who argued in favor of an urgent motion to reopen the Abadilla murder case in view of new evidence. After Colmenares narrated the details of how and why Colonel Abadilla's watch was given to me, the judge instead of asking me to give my testimony cracked a joke. Far from funny, his joke was cheap and vulgar, extremely unbecoming of a man of his profession and the institution he represents. Judge Jaime Salazar smiling, smirking perhaps, commented:

“If you could tell the members of the Alex Boncayao Brigade to choose a mountain, any mountain of their choice where we could meet, I will go there. You, Father, are not a member of the Alex Boncayao Brigade, thus whatever comes from you, not being an official member of the ABB, has to be taken as hearsay. So I would rather talk directly to the members of the ABB who claim that they killed or executed Colonel Rolando Abadilla. I will go to the mountain except for one worry. I am diabetic and I need to relieve myself quite often. This can be a problem because mountains are enchanted. If I pee on some “thing” that I should not pee on, my “thing” might grow long and touch the ground.”

I listened with incredulity to a man of alleged integrity and honor. He was joking and teasing me and everyone else in the room. His ploy was clear, to trivialize what was serious and truly a matter of life and death. The judge did not stop there and continued with a bizarre avalanche of irrelevant comments, peppered with sexual innuendos which ended with the salacious song popularized by former American president Bill Clinton's sex scandal. Judge Salazar, thank God, did not sing it, but it was enough that those present in court heard him repeating, “a little bit of Monica in my mind...a little bit of Monica in my mind.”

Why on earth he had to bring in that song dumbfounded me. As to the Colonel's watch, he ordered the court to take it and put it under lock and key. I surrendered the watch to the clerk of court who takes it with the usual bureaucratic nonchalance. I quietly said goodbye to the watch whose significance and message were once more about to be locked away in another judge's prison of truth, bursting with unused and unaccepted evidence. That was precisely how he called the watch, “inadmissible evidence.” Yet this inadmissible evidence has been taken for safe keeping in the sala of this judge, a judge who most certainly will just ignore it and treat it like he would the many pieces of inadmissible evidences now piling up in his cemetery of truth.

I quietly said goodbye to the Colonel's watch, but made a promise. I promised to listen to the truth that it continues to communicate beyond the confines of its present prison. Here in Hong Kong, thousands of kilometers away from Judge Jaime Salazar's court, I continue to talk and listen to the Colonel's watch. No judge, no court could tell me to stop. No judge, no court can tell the Colonel's watch to stop. In fact, no judge, no court can continually suppress the truth. There was more to the watch than the metal casing, the glass face, the springs and tiny screws, the numbers, hour hand and minute hand, the metal bracelet and the hidden gems that make Omega watches expensive. But this particular watch is priceless, for it witnessed a truth that can set five innocent men free.

These five have been in prison since 1996, twelve years to be exact. Also from where they are, they cry out for the truth and clamor for justice. Funny, how a seemingly lifeless watch continues to speak in the same way that five living men do. The truth does incarnate itself in things and in human beings. A dead man's watch is not just a thing. It was worn by that man wherever he went and whatever he did. It told him and others the time.

I did not pay attention to the time on the Colonel's watch. I just remember that it had stopped. Sadly, it also seems that the wheels of justice in the Philippines have begun to turn slowly, dangerously approaching a standstill. Justice for the Abadilla 5 seems to have stopped. For the courts perhaps, it would have been a foregone conclusion. But there are those who continue to watch and act. There are the families of the Abadilla 5, their lawyers and friends. There are friends and supporters abroad. And I am still around after almost nine years of spending Christmas with a dead man's watch.

That was the last Christmas of the second millennium and the first year of the third. In those days of transition from the last thousand years to the next, a dead man's watch and a priest sat in anxious and painful expectation of better things to come. Truth known whether to things or men is sometimes hostages by something considerably less. Certainly, a lot of pride and amor proprio, fear combined with ambition, legal compromise and commercialized justice, political agenda and posturing and many obvious and less obvious forces are at work using institutions as bigger prisons to surround smaller prisons to further incarcerate the truth.

The Latin phrase is incomplete, "res clamat..." but so is the watch without its owner, the truth without its bearer and proclaimer. "Res clamat..." From afar, I continue to hear the Colonel's watch. I saw them. I know who killed my owner. I know...It's the truth...I know....Yes, I hear and more, I speak and will continue to speak...