

Roger Mangahas

FAITH THROUGH A HABIT OF READING

Jophen Bauí

Roger Mangahas is a Tagalog poet/writer and a former instructor at the University of the East, then a lecturer at De La Salle University, U.P. Manila, and St. Scholastica's College. He earned his Bachelor of Arts in Filipino at the University of the East. Presently he is the editorial consultant at C & E Publishing, Inc. for all Filipino-based textbooks from pre-school to college levels. This job is closely related to his former position as editor in chief (EIC) of Phoenix Publishing House, Inc. and of Sibis Publishing House, Inc. where his functions were mainly administrative and editing of Filipino and Makabayan subjects.

Ka Roger started reading the Bible in the early 1960s when he was a student at the University of the East. Some literary selections had biblical references, and he was obliged to read the exact passages for further information on the story or article. But its old English with “thee, thou, thy” pronoun and medieval words seemed to be a hindrance for him to form the habit of reading it. He renewed his reading of the Holy Scripture in the late 1960s when he got hold of a modern English version. He enjoyed it that his copy featured photos of classical paintings by Da Vinci, Michaelangelo, and other artists. But he got involved in activism, and with friends read instead some books by Marx, Lenin, and Mao.

Then he was detained in Camp Aguinaldo in January 1973, and was transferred to Fort Bonifacio the following month. After more than one and a half years, his longing for his wife, parents and siblings became more intense. One day while he was in the detainees’ library, he opened an old copy of the Bible, and he began to read some passages. It was short reading, but it somehow touched the old faith in him. One night while he was on top of a double-deck bed, he sat up, lowered his head, and prayed:

“Heavenly Father, forgive me. Forgive me, Lord, for all my sins, for the things I should have done but failed to do. But, Lord, when I became an activist Maoist, I did not become an atheist—I did not renounce my faith in You. I’m still a Christian. Lord, please help

me. Have mercy on me. Release me from this detention center so I can rejoin my wife, parents and siblings. Thank you, Lord.”

He felt a sudden lightening of a load in his chest after that prayer. He sensed that God moved something somewhere. As he believed that God granted his prayer, he packed his things the following day. On the third day, he was released together with a priest.

Always, as Ka Roger revisits the Bible, his life takes a turn. “The Bible is relatively a small book, but it is the main source of light and strength for all believers. When I’m engrossed in the Bible, I can feel the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit, His plans, and His love.”

His weekly attendance in Bible studies in the late 1990s radically changed his lifestyle and attitude in life. In that period he was in his peak years as editor in chief. His company (Phoenix/Sibs’) was producing high quality and quantity of textbook and was enjoying enormous volume of sales. Phoenix/Sibs at the time was generally recognized as the leading textbook company and earned greater respect and trust from concerned sectors. At the time Ka Roger was supervising a big staff of select, talented, and committed subject area editorial teams: in English, Filipino, Science, Mathematics, Humanities, Pre-school.

“I found my work rewarding with the realization that I, together with my staff and production people, silently but patiently and persistently contributed to the quality of the company’s products. . . .

“But this humble achievement was intermittently marred by weekly drinking with some friends, engaging in lustful talks with disco girls, and watching them do some erotic, semi-nude or nude dancing. Also, my handling of my staff was not initially effective as it was somewhat elitist.

“Fortunately, some employees initiated a weekly prayer meeting in the office—between 12:00 noon to 1:00 pm—with management’s permission. A friend and co-employee of mine, the late poet Mike L. Bigornia,* suggested that we join the group—and we did. As the prayer meetings with interactions were Bible-based, the participants had to bring their own copy of the Holy Scripture.

**Filipino poet Mike Bigornia (May 16, 1950 - September 24 1991) Editor, fictionist and translator. A recipient of several Palanca Awards Bigornia also won National Book Awards from the Manila Critics Circle for his collection of prose poems, Prosang Itim (Anvil) and Punta-Blanco.*

“My reading was irregular and insufficient, lacking in depth and seriousness. I realized this when one day, I read a biblical reference on one side of a jeepney: “John 3:16”. I felt so humbled for I didn’t know its text! Back at home, I immediately got my Bible, and read the passage: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life:”

“My reading of the Bible became more often and it influenced my administrative style and attitude. I changed my style to a more democratic and conservative one, but firm in the implementation of company policies and departmental regulations.... But my vices didn’t disappear so easily. Weekend drinking still continued. There were more times of meetings with the liquor spirit—not with the Holy Spirit.”

“Then tragedy struck my family. My son—our only child—was stricken with lymphoma, cancer of the lymph nodes, stage three or four. He only had six months to live, according to the doctor. He was twenty one years old. We sent him to the best hospitals: UST, St. Luke’s, De Los Santos, Capitol Medical Center. During this critical period, some prayer groups both from the Catholic charismatic and Evangelical sects offered their spiritual help and joined our family in prayers for the healing of our son.”

During this period some evangelical friends guided the couple to a more regular, serious reading of the Bible.

“At first our son, a vocalist in a youth rock group, found it weird to see such an activity. But gradually, he didn’t just listen, for he joined the group, and would read some verses when asked to do so.

“One time at the hospital where our son was confined, a nurse standing by noticed that the food on the tray was untouched. She said, “Karlos, you have not yet eaten your food.”

“Our son answered while holding the Bible, “Don’t you see, I’m already eating.”

As days went by in the hospital, Ka Roger—his wife, their son—developed a habit of reading the Bible, not weekly, but daily. They would do some reflections after reading some verses for the day, then would pray not just for Karlos, but for other loved ones, friends, the country, and other troubled countries of the world. One day, his wife Fe suggested that Karlos write prayer reflection essays in his sickbed. He did, patterning them after those in the *Daily Bread*.

“The Holy Spirit took pity on us for we were given time—short but enough and lasting—for spiritual bonding before our son finally joined the Lord after battling lymphoma for two and a half years.”

Looking back, Ka Roger saw a significant change in his life during the peak years of his company and while his son was gravely ill until his passing away. “My wife and I became Bible-based Catholics as days passed by. Since then, we have been reading passages from the Bible every day, before we have our breakfast, then we would pray.” They also attended weekly Bible studies with renewed Catholics, and sometimes with Ecumenical groups.

“Living a Bible-based faith, I tread on the Light, the Path, and the Life. Reading the Bible is not just to know the Word of God, but to follow His two greatest commandments (Mathew 22: 37-40, and Mark 12: 28-34). The essence of these two commandments is contained in one word: Love. ... But I’m still a work in progress. I’m only a grain of sand in the seashore of time dreaming to become a part of a free, liberating whole. Time will tell. Some words from my poetry, by Heavenly grace, may tell of God’s presence in my life and witnessing.”