

Nena Benigno

LIFTING CHRIST UP THROUGH WRITING

Ruth Manimtim-Floresca

Aurora “Nena” C. Benigno is a feature writer, speechwriter, scriptwriter and most recently, a book writer. She worked for a while as close-in TV coverage crew news writer for President Cory Aquino and later became the President’s speechwriter and a TV documentary writer for Radio-TV Malacanang. After that, Nena worked as scriptwriter for The 700 Club Asia, and head writer for the Christian Broadcasting Network Asia (CBN Asia). She is author of a book on Filipino missionaries in world gospel frontiers for the Asian Center for Missions (ACM), the missions’ arm of CBN Asia. Nena also writes for Kol Adonai (Voice of the Lord in Hebrew), a Filipino ministry promoting Christ’s purposes in and for Israel and the Jews which is based on the Mount of Olives, Jerusalem, and in Metro Manila.

In high school, Nena C. Benigno had the highest ideals for herself as a writer. “I loved the craft and imagined I would one day write the great Filipino novel, or publish my own collection of poetry,” she said. These ideals are not the least unusual. After all, she has a heritage to live up to. Her father, the late Teodoro “Teddy” Benigno, had already carved a name for himself as a sportswriter and would go on to become Press Secretary and columnist for the *Philippine Star* newspaper.

However, things didn’t go as planned. Although Nena pursued a writing career, she became the kind of writer she used to sneer at while in college. “I became a hack, promoting the Manila International Film Festival and Imelda Marcos’ white beach.” She did script writing for the noontime show *Eat Bulaga* and wrote risqué articles such as ‘*A Day in the Life of a Massage Parlor Hostess*’ for *Ginoo*, a girlie magazine. “I also wrote for the government propaganda network National Media Production Center during the

Marcos regime. To enhance my creativity, I smoked one and half pack of cigarettes a day and took an occasional whiff of Marijuana,” she confessed.

A new beginning

The day came when an American lady name Deonna Howard Tanchi (wife of Pastor Peter Tanchi, founder of the Christ Commission Fellowship) shared Christ’s gospel of salvation with Nena. “I saw myself in the verse *‘Anyone who is joined to Christ is a new being; the old is gone, the new has come.’* (2 Corinthians 5:17). I also realized that my writing gift came from Christ and my highest call as a writer was to lift up His name and the gospel.”

At the time 1 John 2:15-17 left a deep impact on Nena: *‘Do not love the world or anything that belongs to the world. ... for those who do the will of God live forever.’*

“I quit all my hack writing jobs and just drifted, spending time in Bible study and prayer. Then the 1986 EDSA revolution happened. President Cory Aquino moved into Malacañang and needed volunteer writers. A classmate from high school called and asked me to help out. I did.”

One morning, all the volunteers were asked to write a sample speech for the newly-installed President for the anniversary of the founding of Radio Veritas. The next day, Presidential Counsel and Chief Speechwriter Teddy Locsin Jr. came in holding the piece Nena had written and asked her to work under him as speechwriter for the President.

Making God’s Word Visible

Among the speeches she was asked to draft were the religious messages of the President, including her Christmas and Easter messages on national television and her National Prayer Breakfast message. “I saw this as a chance to give credit where credit was due. I gave the glory to Jesus Christ, the name above every name – for the peaceful EDSA revolt, for the nation’s new beginning,” Nena recognized People Power as only second to God Power.

She also took every opportunity to put Bible verses in the speeches, knowing that God's word is "living and active, like a double-edged sword". In speech after speech, President Cory thanked Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, for the miracle of a bloodless revolution. According to Nena, in many of those early speeches, she compared the nation's journey towards true freedom with the Biblical journey of the Jews from Egypt from the Promised Land.

"I heard excerpts and quotes of her speeches thanking Christ, quoting the Scriptures, giving the glory to God on the TV newscasts, the newspapers, even the headline of a national daily, and in an international magazine. God got the glory He deserved for our historic peaceful revolution. And it came from the mouth of President Cory, the highest authority in the land. For there is prophetic and constructive power in verbal declarations, especially if it is made by a head of state."

On finding the right words

One time, Nena was asked to do President Cory's message at a ceremony crowning the EDSA Shrine statue of Mary. "The President was supposed to thank Mary for her role in the miracle of EDSA, after which she would lead a prayer of dedication for the nation. By God's grace, I was enabled to write it in a way that gave the ultimate honor to Christ, consecrating the nation to Him while acknowledging Mary's role and stature as 'blessed among women'."

Nena wrote that Filipinos could well identify with Mary when she mourned for Jesus at Calvary. That she must have felt stricken to her heart, all her hopes dashed when she saw Christ crucified. "In the same way, we felt that our dreams for freedom of the nation were crushed after the assassination of Ninoy Aquino. We thought that our cause for democracy was lost.

"But unexpectedly and miraculously, Christ rose from the grave, defeated death and hell and established his rulership and eternal Kingdom. In the same way, just as suddenly, the EDSA Revolution happened and democracy was restored to the Philippines." Both were acts of God.

“One crucial line of the speech went: ‘With Mary, we thank the Lord Jesus Christ for the miracle of resurrection and a new beginning.’ That was the punchline.”

The speech ended with a prayer dedicating the nation to Christ, asking Him to continue the work of national restoration. Nena watched the TV coverage of the speech. It was read as is, with no changes. “I thanked God that His name was lifted up, for the Philippines is called the ‘only Christian nation in Asia’ and it is our call to model what the Scriptures declare – that ‘every knee shall bow and tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.’”