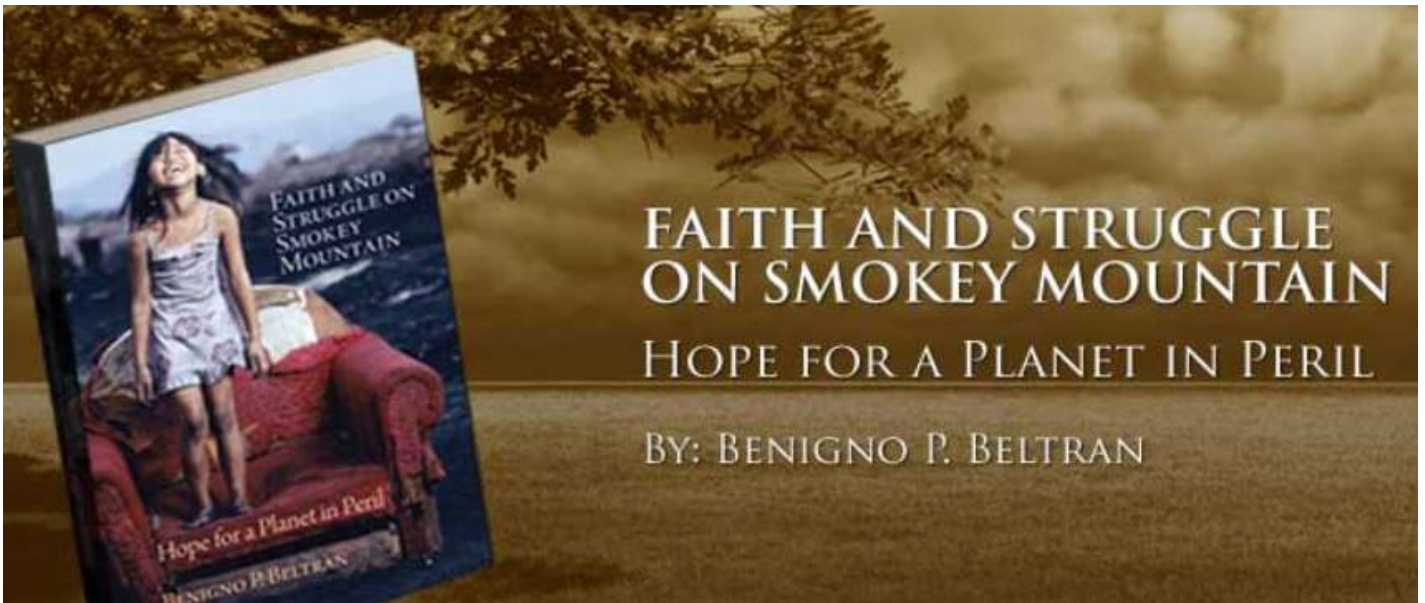


BOOK LAUNCHING EVENT

Join us on Sunday 3:30 pm 13 October 2013
at St Francis Church Monastery Hall

Lonsdale corner Elizabeth Streets, Melbourne 3000 for the launching of this inspiring book. Proceeds of sales will go to the Sandiwaan Learning Centre at Smokey Mountain.

Meet the author **FR. BENIGNO P. BELTRAN SVD**



“I lived for more than thirty years in a huge garbage dump called Smokey Mountain in the heart of the city of Manila It was a journey through the heart of darkness, a pilgrimage through the crucible of despair to emerge into joyful hope in the end.”

Smokey Mountain, a vast garbage dump in Manila, the Philippines, served for many years as an emblem of Third World squalor. In many ways, it is a metaphor for a planet slowly choking on garbage and waste. But for Fr. Beltran, who served for three decades as chaplain to the 25,000 scavengers who survive off this reeking heap, it is also a metaphor of hope—an emblem of the will to survive, the ability to create joy and find meaning even in the midst of abject poverty.

Faith and Struggle on Smokey Mountain describes the spiritual resilience of struggling peoples, and how, through the eyes of Fr. Beltran learned to read the Gospel anew. The lessons he learned bear a message for all who struggle for a better world. www.benbeltran.com

Australian Contact **Dina Franks 0401676210** dfranks2193@yahoo.com.au

CHAPTER I God as Cloud of Unknowing

WELCOME TO THE GARBAGE DUMP

“The cities of the future, rather than being made of glass and steel as envisioned by earlier generations of urbanists, are instead largely constructed out of crude brick, straw, recycled plastic, cement blocks, and scrap wood. Instead of cities of light soaring toward heaven, much of the 21st century urban world squats in squalor, surrounded by pollution, excrement and decay.” –Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums*

Like a fossil preserved in paleolithic rock, the day I first came to Smokey Mountain is embedded in my mind forever.

It was like landing on an alien planet. It took a tremendous act of the will not to retch and void my stomach because of the smell of the decaying garbage. It hit me like a punch in the gut. The overpowering stench, the unbearably sickening sweet-sour smell of putrefaction was hideous and fascinating at the same time. The smell clung to one’s clothes and skin and was difficult to wash away. It made my stomach curl up like an armadillo protecting itself from a predator’s assault. The burning dumpsite easily brought to mind the imagery of fire and sulphur described in the Book of Revelation where the beast and the false prophet are consigned before the millennial reign (Rev. 19:20; see also Gen. 19:24). I was reminded of what the prophet warned when “the earth shall be completely laid waste and utterly despoiled” (Is. 24:3).

The sense of asphyxiation from the suspended particulates in the air was unbearable and made my chest ache as the smell of human refuse burned into my nostrils. Even more painful was the sight of the men, women and children poking into garbage heaps for a living, retrieving broken bottles, plastics, pieces of metal. After years of theological studies in Rome, I suddenly came face to face with the anarchy of desperation, of fear and resignation among people who survive on what others throw away. And the smoke from the constantly burning trash rose up like a great cloud of unknowing, mocking all the knowledge I had acquired in the Eternal City.

Millions of flies and cockroaches and mutant rats (huge!) competed with 25,000 scavengers for survival—25,000 men, women and children who had been trampled upon, squashed, obliterated, condemned without trial to be a stinking class of human beings, carrying their rattan baskets like beasts of burden; people who had been lied to, deceived, duped and spat upon all their lives. Hundreds of scavengers were figuratively crucified in the garbage dump, their hands and feet pierced by rusty nails and broken bottles while they searched for tin cans, scraps of paper and plastic bags and climbed up their own Calvary.

Swarms of huge greenback flies strafed the piles of reeking refuse while worms of various colors crawled on the decaying detritus. I did not know how to keep the horseflies away from the chalice when I celebrated Mass that very same day with the scavengers in their tiny chapel. I did not know what to do with those that got into the wine in the chalice. While I celebrated God’s bounty in the Eucharist, I was surrounded by starving children with swollen bellies, many with pus-encrusted eyes, skin covered with boils. I winced every time they took my hand and touch it to their foreheads in reverence. In my desolation, I raised the host as far as I was able, in my mind raising it higher than the summit of the garbage mountain, beyond the clouds and the stars, beyond the farthest quasar and supernova in the observable universe. “On an altar surrounded with flies, accept, O Lord, this sacrifice.”

As I approached the center of the dump after the Mass, I stood transfixed in the smoldering heat, deafened by the roar of the bulldozers and garbage trucks, with the scavengers shouting to be heard above the din and the horrifying smell of decay assaulting my nostrils. I saw the scavengers with big wicker baskets slung by a strap to their foreheads or shoulders following the bulldozers, dodging the garbage trucks and each other. They used hooks with handles to hoist the garbage into their baskets. They were very skillful in choosing

which kind of plastic or piece of garbage to pierce with their hooks and place it in their baskets with one graceful swing.

I was not able to adjust to what my eyes were telling me. I was assailed by a panorama of garbage of all kinds of shape and color: tin cans, pieces of metal, broken glass, discarded home appliances, battery containers, CDs and radios, battered refrigerators, and broken television sets, various kinds of dead household pets, piles of human and animal excrement, soiled baby diapers, used feminine sanitary napkins, flea- and bedbug-infested mattresses and pillows, blood- and pus-soaked bandages, rusted scalpels, medical syringes and dextrose bottles, spoiled food, rotting fruit and vegetables. And plastic, plastic, plastic everywhere bearing witness to human wastefulness in all its horror.

All hail, the throw-away society!

I looked at the scavengers again, and thought of all the tenderness and sensibility and ideals and poetry and song of a race with deep feelings and fiery passion compressed in upon themselves, bound inward by a constricting wall of resentment within the communal confines of the garbage heaps. Smokey Mountain, what has not been devoured in your demonic furnaces by pollution, despair, disease, insanity, hysteria, and tuberculosis?

Ravaged earth and wasted lives – that is the story of the garbage dump.