

Fr. Benigno P. Beltran, SVD

The Rev. Fr. Benigno P. Beltran, SVD, was born June 5, 1946 in Kolambugan, Lanao del Norte, Philippines. Ordained in 1973, Fr. Beltran received his Doctorate in Theology from Gregorian University in Rome in 1985, and was Scholar-in-Residence at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago from 1985-1986. Author of numerous publications, he won the Manila Critics' Circle National Book Award in 1988 for "The Christology of the Inarticulate." His most recent publication is "Smokey Mountain: Ravaged Earth and Wasted Lives." Currently the parish priest for the Parish of the Risen Christ in Smokey Mountain, Tondo, Manila, Fr. Beltran has spent over a quarter of a century working with the "scavenger residents" living atop of the third largest untreated garbage dump in the world. He has helped to organize, house, educate and empower a community that truly embodies living on "the margins of society." With a foundation of spiritual and value formation, Fr. Beltran has helped the people of his unique parish to help themselves, finding self-respect and hope.

Conversion to "Silicon Mountain"*

An innovative priest wants to bring the Payatas garbage dump into the digital age

By Fr. Jim Mulrone

A new language is being spoken around Manila's notorious Payatas garbage dump, dubbed "Smokey Mountain" because of the fires that perpetually smolder in the rotting garbage.

Since the early 1950s, the dump has been home to a burgeoning population of rag and bone merchants. Now an innovative Divine Word priest, Fr. Benigno Beltran of the Risen Christ parish, is introducing a new computer lingo into the daily conversation with words like bandwidth, e-trading and income streams.

This enterprising, tech-savvy parish priest has known his scavenger parishioners for the past 27 years. He believes, too, that they are stuck in the Industrial Age while globalization has rocketed the world into the Information Era.



Fr. Beltran explains that his people aren't prepared for these changes and don't understand how it operates. Consequently, they do not know how to live in the modern world and this further alienates them, leading them to reject a globalized economy and society instead of embracing them.

Contrary to the stand taken by many social activists, the forward-thinking priest believes this will advance their situation.

The Filipino cleric from the Philippine Island of Mindanao preaches that it is the responsibility of the Church and civil society to help move people on. With help from a government university, he is training hundreds of young, poor people in computer skills.

He has obtained hardware from the Taiwanese government, won a contract in computer coding in Hong Kong, begun work with a German corporation to begin mining the old dump for heavy metal, sponsored the startup of a composting and recycling business and worked with women in the dump to manufacture organic health soap.



Fr. Beltran also has launched a Church-supported program in Arabic computer programming for Middle Eastern clients. He even wants to change the pejorative name of the dump to "Silicon Mountain" as a sign that things are on the move.

He has the approval and blessing of the Manila archdiocese for a new trading network that will link his and seven other parishes with farm cooperatives, allowing poor people in the city and the country to deal with each other.

Church organizations have offered their support and the archdiocese has directed its parishes to recycle their rubbish through the people's operation.

When things get going, Fr. Beltran claims they will be able to provide low-interest capital loans to small farmers, thus rescuing them from the clutches of usurious money lenders.

Fr. Beltran is describing the organization as an eBay-like service with a closed-circuit loop that begins by looking at what the people have rather than what they don't have. He calls this "asset-based development."

He is planning a new church built from blocks of recycled waste with solar paneling, rain catchment systems and composting toilets. It also will use specially designed vents for air circulation, which will obviate the need for air conditioning and only use electricity generated from diesel made out of waste coconuts.

One person's trash may remain another's treasure, but the cost may be easier to bear.

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