

“A Warm Heart, Open to All”: Remembering Fr. Emile Victor Bieler: Missionary and Formator

Armada Riyanto, C.M.

The following is the homily delivered at the Mass of Christian Burial for Fr. Emile Victor Bieler, C.M., a life-long missionary, seminary formator, and a member of the Province of Indonesia.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The day, Wednesday, November 19, 2014, when Fr. Victor Bieler CM passed away should be viewed as that of a time for faith, despite being a sad moment for all of us. Fr. Emile Victor Bieler has now returned to the Source of life, to God whom he was longed for during his whole life. A friend calls him “a light shining for a while that is now going back to the Source of light itself.” Fr. Emile’s friends and I myself were all in tears upon hearing his holy departure for eternity. And yet, in the light of our faith, his departure to God is telling us His immense love in the life of Fr. Emile Victor Bieler.

Although Fr. Emile was 85 years old, yet he was never seen as elderly and aging. He showed us how profound faith in God and philosophical understanding could rejuvenate life and physical performance. Being teacher (or better yet “professor”) to almost all in the Province, he presented himself as a friend with a warm heart open to all. One still remembers his strong hand and firm fingers when shaking hands. It does not just tell us about his physically good stamina, but it also portends of the warmth of his presence and welcoming way.

Fr. Bieler taught almost every subject we were in school to learn: Biblical theology, English, Latin, Patristics, the Social Doctrine of the Church, philosophy, as well as the practical things of life and community. Yet, above all, he taught us not by intellectual eloquence but by exemplary love, perseverance, and diligence. He could travel from the seriousness in sophisticated philosophy to a surprising sense of humor by cracking a joke without losing firmness and assertiveness as a leader. It is not surprising when recalling how he once became rector of two different theological-philosophical institutions at the same time. It happened in the late 1980s. He was about to leave for Papua after

his sabbatical semester. Being known as a man with a beautiful gift for leadership, Fr. Emile was immediately installed as rector of the so-called “Fajar Timur” school of philosophy and theology at Abepura, in West Papua New Guinea (Irian Jaya). But when he was selected as Rector in Papua New Guinea, Fr. Bieler was also still rector at the “Widya Sasana” School of Philosophy and Theology in Malang. He might well be known as the first person in the Congregation who broke the record by holding such a responsibility as rector of two institutions of philosophy and theology at the same time for about a year!

This record does not fit any personal ambition of our confrere, Fr. Bieler. He remained a simple Vincentian. Yes, simplicity was one of the Vincentian virtues, which he loved so much. He suggested the word “Kepolosan” in Indonesian language for that virtue. This word (“Kepolosan”) means more or less nothing to reserve for oneself or giving the wholeness of oneself to God alone. Indeed EVB was the man who accomplished his job with the best effort possible, as he could.

Since he diligently and tirelessly involved himself in priestly formation throughout his life, he became a person whom we, students, have often seen as a role model, someone we wished to emulate. What I mean is that he has been an inspiration to us. Many, many priests, seminarians, Daughters of Charity, Sisters and laity were fortunate to have him in their formation years. We know he touched many hearts of priests and seminarians of Indonesia as well as the Solomon Islands with his simple presence.

In Indonesia, the students came to seminary from different religious congregations and dioceses, whereas in the Solomon Islands, Fr. Bieler’s students were from three dioceses: Honiara, Gizo, and Auki. His love and everything he possessed were meant to work for formation. The Holy Name of Mary Seminary in the Solomon Islands was his last, forever love. He even showed his willingness to come again to the Solomon Islands after recovering from illness in the hospital.

In the words of Bishop Adrian Smith (of Honiara, Solomon Islands), Fr. Bieler was one of the “Founding Fathers” of the mission in the Solomon Islands. He said: “Fr. Victor was the first Vincentian to come to the Solomon Islands when we were seeking help to run our Seminary. He was most encouraging in those early days when everything seemed so uncertain. That is his special gift – he was a person who encouraged others. He was with us when we got the green light from Rome to proceed forward. I am sure the seminarians who knew him will always remember him as a Father who cared for them and who was interested in them. I want you to know that in our three dioceses we will be remembering Father Victor at the Altar of the Lord. His life story is one great story; he was a man of such great experiences and has made a wonderful contribution to building up Holy Name of Mary

Inter-Diocesan Seminary in Solomon Islands. He was part of the foundation, and so I am sure that what he did to develop this mission will remain as a testimony of the man he is in the work of other Vincentians” (*Taken from an e-mail of Bishop Adrian Smith to the Visitor of Indonesia*).

Some tributes posted on the “Facebook” page for Holy Name of Mary Seminary are quite telling in their words of condolence: “I just want to add that Fr. Victor Bieler C.M., was one of the ‘founding fathers’ of Holy Name of Mary Seminary along with the Bishops. He put in a huge effort to bring the Vincentians to Solomon Islands to run the seminary and then gave his last years to this ministry. Thank you, Victor. Rest in Peace, Victor.” “Fr. Victor passed away today in Indonesia. He is a saint in my opinion. If only we had more like him!”

When we invited him to share his mission of the Solomon Islands to the students of Widya Sasana School of Philosophy and Theology at Malang a few years ago, he encouraged each one of us to go to the mission by saying strongly: “Dear students, as you know, I am working in a part of the Pacific Islands called the ‘Solomon Islands’. I would like to encourage all of you to pay attention to the people of these remote Islands. The Church has often forgotten those people; even God himself sometimes may seem to have forgotten those living in remote places there... So, let us not forget them, let’s go there evangelizing those people.” What a love of mission! What a beautiful love!

How do we understand such a wonderful love that Fr. Bieler had for missionary work? I believe that such a beautiful love does not emerge instantly; instead, it comes gradually and has strongly been nurtured in deep faith in God.

Fr. Emile Victor Bieler was born in Surabaya, Indonesia on June 13, 1929. In the time of the Indonesian revolution for independence in 1945, he was sixteen years old. He was in Surabaya with his dear father, a man of Swiss heritage. Despite being European, his father was not exterminated as an Internee by the Japanese troops. He was able to stay alive simply because he was an expert in financial matters. The Japanese employed him to serve in financial field for “PETA” (Pembela Tanah Air), the famous name of the revolutionary movement for Independence from the Dutch. But when the Allies defeated the Japanese in World War II, there was a very chaotic situation in Surabaya. The Indonesian revolutionaries sent Fr. Bieler and his father to jail in Kalisosok, Surabaya. There in prison father and son suffered from Indonesian injustice.

Why did the Indonesians put him in prison while he was helping them in their struggle to gain independence? We are not sure. When the Bieler family transferred to Holland in 1949, Fr. Bieler entered the seminary of the Congregation of the Mission. Knowing that his son might be sent back to Indonesia after ordination, his father began to

disagree with his decision to enter a missionary community. "How is it that Emile Victor is returning to Indonesia to serve and to dedicate his life to those who put him in prison a few years ago?" As a result, Fr. Bieler's relationship with his father became strained. His classmate, lifelong friend, and confrere, Fr. Wiel Bellemakers CM, said that his return to Indonesia was a "very difficult decision" of which he admired mostly the fearless and flawless love Emile Victor Bieler exhibited for the mission. In other words, it was the profound love of EVB for Indonesians, regardless of the unpleasant experiences in the prison of Kalisosok, Surabaya. As one can imagine, being in prison during war-time creates a daily uncertainty in life. Fr. Bieler's love of God transcended such an obstacle.

When he arrived in Indonesia, he was immediately assigned to Saint Vincent's seminary in Garum. He taught philosophy to the students who prepared themselves for theology. From Garum he travelled to Eastwood, Australia, accompanying those in theology. Then, he was called back to Kediri to initiate a new building for the major seminary for the Vincentian seminarians.

The Second Vatican Council was the very pivotal point of revision for the system of priestly education throughout the Church and Indonesia was no exception. Fr. Bieler was among the formators who promoted the so-called "solid collaboration" to establish major seminaries in Indonesia. He worked together with the Carmelite Fathers to prepare a curriculum for philosophy and theology. This "working together" was the providential start of a beautiful collaboration that helped bring the Widya Sasana School of Philosophy and Theology into being. Of course, Fr. Bieler was not alone in establishing such a big enterprise as a school of philosophy and theology. But he was one of the main founders in this beautiful fruit of collaboration between the Carmelites and the Vincentians that brought about the Widya Sasana School of Philosophy and Theology in Malang, where almost one third of the dioceses in Indonesia and fifteen religious congregations have sent their candidates to study philosophy and theology.

Recalling the events of Fr. Bieler's life may seem to be endless, but I must include my own personal story. The other fruitful period in his life that needs to be mentioned is when Father Richard McCullen C.M., then Superior General, summoned him from the 'jungle' of Papua New Guinea to Rome to be Secretary General and then Assistant General in time of Fr. Robert Maloney C.M. Rome was the start of Fr. Bieler's international ministerial journey. From both Fathers McCullen and Maloney, we heard that Fr. Bieler was a true man of collaboration. He tirelessly dedicated his ability in both fixing practical problems in the house and setting up a vision of the future of the larger Congregation of the Mission. He was the man behind the scene; together with Fr. Robert Maloney, he promoted a shift that led to a new understand-

ing of mission in the Congregation which included a cultural sensitivity he had long championed in doing mission work with the poor. He involved himself in setting up regular meetings for formators in the provinces in Asia-Pacific, Africa, Latin America, and elsewhere, and urged the Congregation to deal with interreligious dialogue, especially with Islam. Several confreres from different continents gladly shared their encounter with Fr. Bieler as a man who inspired them with the virtues of simplicity and practical ability, as well as always providing a warm welcome.

Fr. Robert Maloney CM, former Superior General, remembered Fr. Emile Victor Bieler CM as follows: "He was a great Vincentian and missionary. I was privileged to live with him, pray with him, and work with him for so many years in Rome. We travelled together to China, to Japan, to Australia, to the Solomons, to Istanbul, to Austria, to Holland, to Indonesia, of course, and to many other places. He was a wise counsellor and a tireless worker. He had great practical gifts and endless patience. We used to work together taking computers apart and putting them back together! When we were in Taiwan, we bought new, advanced computer parts and then installed them when we got back to Rome. In his heart, he always remained a missionary. I remember how fondly he spoke of his years in Irian Jaya [West Papua]. Then, after Rome, even though he was no longer young, he served so generously in the Solomons. Priestly formation had a huge place in his life" (*Fr. Robert Maloney's letter to Visitor of Indonesia, Fr. Robertus Wijanarko CM*).

Dear brothers and sisters, let me now say a few last words directly to Emile Victor Bieler:

"Dear Father Bieler, we just want to express our deep gratitude to you for your ceaseless and tireless dedication to priestly formation. We do accompany your last journey toward eternity with our prayers and masses. Eternity simply means 'encountering God' as you taught us in your philosophy class. When you reach there, when you meet Him whom you loved and longed for so much, we hope that you not forget us in your prayers. Please insert us in your prayers that all of us may be as tireless as you were to be faithful disciples of Jesus; that each one of us may diligently continue your beautiful legacies and steps; and that God may bless us always in all our days."