

## THE HOSPITAL THAT MIRACLES BUILT

BY

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The story begins with a letter from Bishop Emmanuel Trance of the diocese of Catarman, Northern Samar, one of the poorest provinces of the Philippines. Our Sisters who run the Divine Word Hospital in Tacloban, which was the only hospital left functioning during the typhoon Hyan, happened to make an excursion in Catarman and made a courtesy call to the bishop. Bishop Trance said, "If our people here get sick and they have to go to your hospital, they will die on the way because of the length of travel to Tacloban which takes 6 hours. Why don't you put up a hospital here?" Our Sisters said, "Why don't you write to our Prioress (which happened to be me in 2010)" not thinking he would really write. He wrote to me not thinking I would answer. But I did take his letter seriously and so I asked my Priory Councilors of 5 for advice. They said, "Why don't we make a priory-wide spiritual discernment?" Which we did. After this prayerful discernment, I asked all 180 Sisters from 21 houses all over the Philippines to vote whether we should embark on the project or not. Those who were against gave the reasonable objection that we had no money and we had no personnel for a hospital. Those who were for it called our attention to our option for the poor and this project is certainly for the poor. Anyway the result of the voting was that the majority of Sisters voted to go on with the project. I then asked permission of our Generalate in Rome and we got the permission to go ahead. That is when miracles began to happen. ( Notice , I am not putting miracles in quotation marks, because I think they are.)

Our first need was the land—the lot where the hospital will be built. I sent a committee of 3 Sisters to assess the situation, to look for resources etc. The committee said there was real need for a hospital because health service in the region is poor . They said there was a Chinese businessman who is offering his land near the city at 1,000 pesos per square meter which I found quite expensive for a rural area. Meanwhile, a person, Jun Lozada, whom we put in our sanctuary because he was a whistle-blower exposing corruption in a government deal (that is another story) told me that he has a friend who is from Catarman, a lawyer who belongs to an affluent family in that place. His name is Bayani Tan. One day he sent me by email pictures of lots belonging to his family where we could build our hospital. He suggested that we make an ocular inspection. He bought plane tickets for 4 Sisters and paid also for our hotel bills for 2 days. We went around the town and we chose a promising one in a place called Bobon. We were very happy to have found a lot. Unfortunately, some months later the government made some surveys and declared some places as hazard zones which included our chosen lot.

So again we came back to look in neighboring towns for a lot. Meanwhile I sent 3 Sisters to begin a community based health program talking with the people, training health workers etc. Since we had no convent there, they rented a house near the University of Eastern Philippines. The landlady had a friend who used to be a resident of the place but she and her family moved to Chicago some years back. During the birthday of this friend, Mrs. Rosalina Co Salazar, the landlady wished her a happy birthday and happened to say that she had 3 Sisters renting her house

who wanted to build a hospital and are looking for a place to build it on. Mrs. Salazar said “I have 7 hectares there in Pambujan. I want to give one half to the Sisters for them to build a hospital. That is how we acquired three and a half hectares for our hospital. FIRST MIRACLE!!!

I was so happy. I told our treasurer she should put the money we saved in a restricted fund for the construction of a hospital. I asked an architect to make a quotation for a 25 bed hospital . Our savings are not even half of the quoted amount.

In 2001, the whole world celebrated the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the International Day of Women. An organization in New York, WOMEN DELIVER, put up a list of 100 INSPIRING PEOPLE IN THE WORLD which included Hillary Clinton, Oprah Winfrey, Melinda Gates, Queen of Jordania. And believe it or not my name was included in the list! This was featured in our national paper, Philippine Daily Inquirer in an article entitled :PINOY NUN MAKES IT TO THE TOP 100. I was interviewed and later on the Congress of the Philippines asked me to come during one of their sessions and gave me a citation. What has this got to do with our hospital? Well, someone read the article and gave me a call and asked if I could go to her office , which I did . It was on the 12<sup>th</sup> floor of a building in the commercial area of Makati City. When I came in, a pretty woman of about 45 greeted me at the door , extended her hand and said: “ Congratulations, Sister Mary John, I want to honor you. Do you have a project” Wow, do I have a project? So I told her about our dream of a hospital among the poor in the far way province of Northern Samar. She said ,”Good, that is the kind of project our foundation would want to support.” And when we were seated , she said,” Sister, you don’t remember me” You see, I was Dean of College of St. Scholastica’s College for 18 years. But since we had about 100 scholars a year, I didn’t really recognize her.” She said, “ I come from a very poor family with 10 children. We were so poor we did not even have a table to do our homework. We just sat on our staircase. You gave the three of us older sisters 3 scholarships, one took Hotel and Restaurant Management, another Psychology and I took up Accounting. Without those scholarships we would not have finished college.” And now she is PRESIDENT AND CEO of HYUNDAI ASIA!

After a few days , she set a date for our signing of the MOA. When she and the Chairperson of her board came to St. Scholastica’s College where I was residing for the signing of the MOA, she said, “Could we go first to your chapel “ So we did. Pointing at a bench near the entrance of the chapel, she said, “You know, when I was a student, I used to sit on that bench waiting for my hunger to pass. She had no money to buy lunch in the canteen. She noticed that our janitors were cooking some thick soup at the back of the canteen. That is all she could afford- a cup of soup for her lunch. But sometimes she did not even have money for that. So with empty stomach she would just sit in the chapel and wait for her hunger to pass before going to her accounting class at 2 pm. Sometimes a janitor who would notice that she was not around would bring her a cup of soup in the chapel. We then proceeded to our signing of the MOA. I noticed that there was no amount mentioned in the documents. So the next day, I called her lawyer who had become a friend and I said, “Lorna, this is embarrassing but I have to ask you because the Sisters will ask me. How much is Hyundai giving us for the construction because there is no amount in the documents.” She laughed and said, “Sister, there is no amount because Miss Agudo is committing the HARI

Foundation to construct you whole hospital together with the adjoining convent for the Sisters!”  
SECOND MIRACLE!

So in February of 2012, we had the ground-breaking. The students went out of their classrooms and waved their little flags at us as we drove around the town to the ground-breaking place. The Mayor said , it is the first big project he has seen in this little town in all of his 56 years!. In spite of the heavy rain we had a wonderful groundbreaking with the presence of Bishop Trance, some Priests, the Mayor and our 2 benefactors , Fe Perez Agudo and Mrs, Rosalina Co Salazar! And of course our new Mother Prioress, Sr. Lumen Gloria Dungca and the Benedictine Sisters from nearby communities of Ormoc and Tacloban

In May of 2013, we had the blessing of our convent which had a small infirmary in front so that our Sister Doctor Leonor Barrion could treat outpatients. I remember the first time she treated patients, she texted me and said “ Do you know what our first payment is?—Squash!. And so we had daily supplies of vegetables, eggs and occasionally chicken. We decided that we should have a socialized payment , meaning we will accept what the patients can afford. We even give them free medicines. Fine, but then I began to ask myself , how can we pay our future staff of doctors, nurses and other personnel? Of course we cannot pay them with eggs and chicken. So then and there I decided to put up an Endowment fund for salaries and wages.

There is still another miracle to relate. In our survey, we found out there are remote places where people would find it hard to find their way to our hospital so we thought we should have a Mobile Clinic. I approached the Philippine Charity Sweepstakes Office (PCSO) for a public-private partnership. They would put a mobile clinic at our disposal and we would use it in our area. But before we could sign the MOA, a scandal broke out , the so-called “Pajero Scandal” accusing some bishops of getting luxury vehicles from the PCSO. That made me pause . I consulted my Board of Trustees and we felt we did not want in the future to get involved in such problems. Meanwhile I got a phone call from the lawyer of PCSO saying that our Mobile Clinic is already here and we could sign the formal agreement. I had to tell him that we are not going on with the partnership. But my heart went down to my toes because there is the Mobile Clinic all ready for us to use and we are rejecting it. Two weeks after, I got an email from our Benedictine Service Office in Vanves France, the AIM, saying that they got two donors for our mobile clinic! I forgot that I also sent them a project proposal. The email said; “Please send us your bank account and we will send the amount in 3 tranches.” Within a month I received 110 ,000 Euros which actually covered only the cost of the van excluding the equipment. Anyway we went ahead and ordered the Mobile Clinic. While the van was being constructed our former Mother General , Mo. Irene Dabalus, the only Filipina to become Mother General of our Congregation , was invited to give a talk in Germany. She paid a visit to MISSIO Munich. From there she sent me an email that the President of MISSIO is interested in our Mobile Clinic Project. So I sent him a copy of our project proposal saying that we already had the money for the van but not yet for the equipments. After two months , I received a check for 56,000 Euros that covered the cost of the equipment. So now we own a Mobile Clinic! THIRD MIRACLE OR WHAT?

In 2014, we had the blessing of the nearly finished hospital. The only thing lacking was the chapel which would be built in the middle of the hospital. Atty Bayani Tan who offered the first

lot to us which turned out to be in a hazard zone said , his family would like to donate the chapel. In July of 2016, we had the turnover of the hospital from the HARI foundation of Hyundai. And on August 28, we had the blessing of our beautiful chapel! **FOURTH MIRACLE AND COUNTING.**

At the time of this writing, we just got our licence for our dialysis clinic and is now accepting patients. We are still working for our licence to operate meaning to accept in-patients. I am still the one-woman fund raising agency because our endowment fund goal has not yet been reached. Everywhere I go I tell our story and in a homily I gave in New York, I said:

***“Undertaking a hospital project is no joke. But having gone through this journey, I learned two things. First, that miracles do happen—not only to saints but to ordinary people like us and second: IT PAYS TO DREAM AND DREAM BIG, because if one’s dream is worthwhile fulfilling all the forces of the universe even the cosmic ones will align themselves to make our dream come true.”***

