

## Fr Roque J. Ferriols, SJ (1924-2021)\*

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The motto of Ateneo de Manila University in Latin is *Lux in Domino*, translated as ‘Light in the Lord’. The phrase comes from the letter of St Paul to the Ephesians: ‘For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth).’<sup>1</sup>

Fr Roque Ferriols SJ, whose mortal body left us on Sunday 15 August 2021,<sup>2</sup> the Feast of the Assumption, is truly light for generations of Ateneo de Manila students as well as all over the Philippines, since his students became teachers in many other schools. Padre Roque is light to Filipino philosophy and philosophising in Filipino. He is light not only to minds but also to hearts that desired the mercy of the Lord.

Padre Roque—who was only one day short of 97, 80 years a Jesuit, 67 years a priest, more than 50 years a philosophy teacher—is the most brilliant and wisest Filipino I have ever met. He ranks up there with Jose Rizal and another Jesuit, Fr Horacio de la Costa, in

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\* This piece was first published by *Rappler* as ‘Padre Roque, who helped us see the light’, 18 August 2021, available at: <[www.rappler.com/voices/thought-leaders/opinion-roque-ferriols-helped-us-see-light/](http://www.rappler.com/voices/thought-leaders/opinion-roque-ferriols-helped-us-see-light/)>. It is reprinted with the gracious permission of *Rappler*’s editor. The article has been edited and some original content added to it.

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his mastery of languages,<sup>3</sup> depth of insight into our culture and what makes us Filipinos, and in the elegance of his writing. As his classmate Fr Catalino Arevalo SJ, also a towering Jesuit intellectual and theologian, said quoting Fr De La Costa: ‘Roque Ferriols is the only true genius we have among the Philippine Jesuits.’<sup>4</sup>

Padre Roque taught me two philosophy courses: one on ancient and mediæval philosophy, and the other on Søren Kierkegaard. My biggest regret as an Ateneo de Manila philosophy major is that I was not able to take more courses with him. This was because, as a Cebuano-speaking *Bisdak* from Mindanao, I initially felt intimidated by the course requirement that we read and write in Filipino. It took me a while to conquer that fear, which I was eventually able to. In fact, a few years later I also started teaching philosophy in Filipino.

I have fond memories of my many encounters with Fr Roque, including of how he looked at me with a naughty grin one time in his ancient philosophy class after I asked a stupid question. ‘With a question like that,’ he responded, ‘I should throw the eraser to you. Instead, I will just smile!’ I remember, too, how he entered the classroom the day John Paul II was elected Pope, excited that a philosopher who knew phenomenology was now Pope. Or that time in 1985 when he learned that I had chosen Camiguin as my honeymoon destination. Roque said to Diane, the department secretary, that only I would choose that island, which at the time had no fancy hotels. I felt so proud, even if undeserving, to meet him again in 2004 on his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday after many years of being away in the U.S. He looked at me and said, ‘You are the lawyer of the oppressed.’ I supposed that he remembered our conversations when I was still a law student at the University of the Philippines while also teaching philosophy in Ateneo de Manila.

My mind and heart were forever changed by the experience of being in a Ferriols classroom. It confirmed the reason why so many of us who were non-seminarians chose or shifted to philosophy in college. In our forms, we used to write in response to the question ‘Why shift to philosophy?’ with ‘I saw the light’.

Padre Roque helped us see the light. It was not just that he enabled us to go back to the time of the first Greek philosophers, the

pre-Socratics, to share in their first experience of abstraction. It was not just that Padre Roque helped us put on the eyes and heart of a Socrates and an Augustine searching for the truth that matters. It was not just being given an insight into the agony—the fear and trembling—and faith of the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard. Above all, Padre Roque taught us how to think, how to ask questions, how to wonder, ultimately to search for God, which leads us to the discovery that it is God who searches for us. We will never forget Fr Ferriols' words, *Isa lang ang mahalaga sa buhay: hanapin ang kalooban ng Diyos at tupdin ito*, meaning: "There is only one thing important in life: find the will of God and obey it."<sup>5</sup>

Aside from the two courses he taught me and like many others, I was also a student of Padre Roque vicariously through his students, who became my teachers. These included Dr Ramon Reyes who was my mentor in modern and contemporary philosophy and made Hegel, Kant, and Husserl familiar to me; Dr Leovino Garcia who introduced me to Levinas and Ricœur and whose relationship with Padre Roque has always been edifying; Dr Manny Dy who was my ethics and Chinese philosophy teacher; Fr Joel Tabora SJ who was my mentor in understanding Karl Marx; Rayvi Sunico who taught us the philosophy of religion during our undergraduate years and Plato when we were graduate students; and Pablito Perez, now a Justice of the Court of Appeals who was my first philosophy teacher, who confirmed to me by his example of philosophising in the classroom that I was taking the right college major. Although I was never his student, Dr Eddie Calasanz should be on the list because of his immense intellectual and personal influence in my life.

My students in law, philosophy, and governance can also claim to have vicariously been taught by Padre Roque, as much of what I teach would be rooted in my own philosophical education. Certainly, my sons—all Ateneo alumni and two of whom were philosophy majors in college—were also taught in this way by Ferriols.

As his co-teacher, I was able to have many conversations with Padre Roque and learned even more from him. It was during those

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years that he also became more prolific in writing as he discovered the wonders of word processing and the personal computer. That allowed him to write many books, all in Filipino, in which he asked the most profound questions about being, which he translated as *meron* and explained as a dynamic reality or process of *pagmemeron*,<sup>6</sup> about being and becoming human or *pagpapakatao*, and always about God.

In his *Philosophy of Religion*,<sup>7</sup> he translates a text on hope by Gabriel Marcel and excerpts from Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, which he translates in a stroke of genius as *Pag-amin at Papuri*. I literally cry when I use these texts in my seminary classes because of the beauty of Marcel's and Augustine's ideas, which are made even more beautiful and accessible to the reader by Padre Roque's mastery of Filipino.

I cannot think of a better example of the teacher and writer that I wanted and want to be than Padre Roque. I cannot think of a better life, lived fully in wisdom and holiness than that of this priest and Jesuit. We see this in his book *Glimpses into my beginnings*, which is Ferriols' memoirs of his life as a young Jesuit during World War II when Manila was under Japanese occupation.<sup>8</sup>

In that book, Ferriols recalls the Battle of Manila and describes seeing the body of a dead Japanese soldier: 'I saw a dead Japanese soldier sprawled on the street, face up. I knew he was a Japanese soldier because of his shoes. Except for his pair of shoes, he was not wearing anything. He was completely naked, and his penis was erect. Someone threw some earth at his body. Oil had been dumped on his face. But you could make out the emotions he had before he died. His face was that of a young boy gripped by fear. The last thing he saw in his dying moments was what triggered his fear. And a voice told me, "Don't ever forget that these Japanese are human. Never forget this. All human beings are human."' "

Even then, in 1945, three years before the United Nations General Assembly adopted and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Fr Roque understood the meaning and the transcendental importance of human rights.

In the final chapter of this book, Padre Roque recalls a spiritual conference with Fr de la Costa, reflecting on what they had just gone through during the Japanese occupation and the Battle of Manila:

‘He reminded us that we were facing the long discipline of studying to be a Jesuit. In all these undertakings, whatever your field may be, never forget, he reminded us, that Christ is in everything and he will always be with us. For in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God, and without the Word, there will be no creation.<sup>9</sup> The Word became flesh...Christ is the Word.<sup>10</sup> He is with us in everything. Always. He will fill our nets with fish to the brim, if we wait patiently the whole night through...we will cast our nets though we catch nothing.<sup>11</sup> He will make our wine his blood,<sup>12</sup> when we are hardly able to walk as we come from the hell...the earthen jar overflowing with water precariously on our back.<sup>13</sup> He will feed the teeming multitudes whenever we share with them what little we have.’<sup>14</sup>

Fr Roque goes on to say: ‘It is through our bread and two fish and a poem that we begin metaphysics.’ In the same chapter, he also shares a beautiful poem which concludes with what he has always taught us, that ‘the end is always the beginning.’

Padre Roque was Light in the Lord. For those of us who were blessed to have been taught by him, he helped us see the light. Padre helped us live as children of light. With God’s grace and imperfect as we were, he enabled us to produce also some goodness, righteousness, and truth. We will always be grateful to him.

## Notes

- 1 Ephesians 5:8-9. NIV.
- 2 Paterno R. Esmaguél II, 'Father Roque Ferriols, pioneer of philosophy in Filipino, dies at 96', in *Rappler*, 15 August 2021, available at: <<https://www.rappler.com/nation/jesuit-priest-father-roque-ferriols-dies-august-15-2021>>.
- 3 Roque J. Ferriols, 'North Sampalokese is better than Plato's Greek', in *Synkrētic*, №1 (Feb. 2022): 103-106.
- 4 Also cited in Esmaguél II, 'Jesuit Roque Ferriols turns 90, touches lives of youth', in *Rappler*, 16 August 2014 available at: <<https://r3.rappler.com/rappler-blogs/paterno-esmaquel/66423-jesuit-roque-ferriols-ateneo-youth>>.
- 5 Cf. Ecclesiastes 12-13, NIV: 'Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind.'
- 6 Florentino T. Timbreza, 'Filipino logic', in *Synkrētic*, №1 (Feb. 2022): 107-110.
- 7 Roque Ferriols, *Pilosopiya ng relihiyon* (Quezon City: Bluebooks, 2014).
- 8 Roque Ferriols, *Glimpses into my beginnings* (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University, 2016).
- 9 John 1:1.
- 10 John 1:14.
- 11 Luke 5:1-11; John 21:1-14.
- 12 Matthew 26:28.
- 13 Cf. Luke 22:10.
- 14 Matthew 14:13-21; Matthew 15:32-39.