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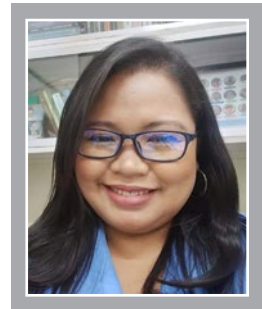
## The Reluctant Economist

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“There are no mistakes. The events we bring upon ourselves, no matter how unpleasant, are necessary in order to learn what we need to learn; whatever steps we take, they’re necessary to reach the places we’ve chosen to go.”

(Richard Bach, *The Bridge Across Forever*)

Alfie Maria Oppura Rio Custodio  
Business College Dean  
Province of East Asia, Philippines



**M**y name has “Maria” on it, after Our Lady which was very common for Catholic mothers to do. But now, this addition to my name is more than that. We love Mama Mary and the Marist Mission. This I do and have been doing for the last 25 years. It started with a call, from a friend, who told me that Notre Dame of Dadiangas University (NDDU) needed a substitute Lecturer for Economics, but they needed someone willing to work full-time, for just about 50 days.

I was working full time then but the calling “to teach” was so strong and the idea of being a part of a Marist community was so attractive. It sounded like a dream come true for me. So, I did! I resigned from working as an HR Staff and proceeded to apply as a Substitute Teacher. Since 1998 and fast forward, I no longer am a substitute. I am a permanent Teacher and have become a reluctant leader of one of the big colleges in the university – the Business College.

The other story was I didn’t like Economics as a Course, but I was forced to take it just to keep the academic scholarship. When you are from a poor family, your options are narrow. But I did my best. The struggle was real, working as a Service Crew at a fast-food chain and taking care of my siblings too, but I finished on time. When I was in my 2nd year of teaching, I planned on getting a new degree for a master’s, but the school administration emphasized that I should only take what was aligned to Economics, so again, reluctantly I took the Master of Arts majoring in Economics. Years later, I thought I would lose all my interest in other fields but it turned out I wanted to explore Institutional Development for post-graduate studies. But then again, I was reminded by the School Vice President that it would be better to enroll in a



degree that is aligned to, again, Economics. So I did, from the Royal Pontifical University of Santo Tomas in Manila.

In 2012, despite all the challenges of being a post-grad student and a working mother far away from the family, I was one of the 2 graduates of the Neo Centennial Batch of the University of Santo Tomas for Doctor of Philosophy in Economics, and I did with Latin Honors. That day, I said to myself I shouldn't be reluctant anymore. I have to embrace the idea that this is where God wants me to be. I became a renewed teacher until the Dean of the Business College died and I was assigned to take his place. Such big shoes to fill. For years, I had difficulty adjusting to administrative work because I felt like I was losing the dream, the mission.

Years have passed, and I was given the grace to cope and survive. I was blessed with faculty, staff, students, and fellow administrators who were very supportive. I continued with my work and advocacies on the side. With my son growing to be a little man, and myself developing from reluctant to enthusiastic, I felt happy.

It felt good realizing that you can serve God wherever you are or whatever it is you do, at any time. The students who were with me each semester kept inspiring me. I really thought that my work, my advocacies and hobbies, and all my extensions to the other institutions were enough for me to say that my world is bigger.

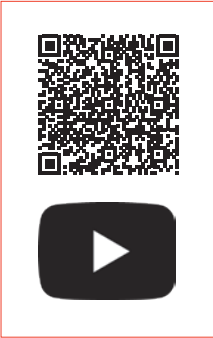
Not until I was asked to be a small part of the Sustainability Project, to help train the brothers from Africa, Asia, and Oceania in financial management via a short course. The world was definitely bigger. We took the challenge. It was a project that me and my colleagues would never forget. The fellowship with the Brothers for several weeks as we delivered the course made us understand the Marist mission more and somehow renewed and strengthened our commit-



ment. Then the pandemic came. While the world is slowly recovering, another call from Rome happened. A voice told me “You can say NO, but don’t”. I thought it may have come from the Brother President or the Provincial or from St. Marcellin himself. I was asked to be a part of the Marist International Council of Economic Affairs (ICEA), and I said YES.

I said YES to the new mission. I said YES to the new challenges. I said YES to new experiences. I said YES to all that would come to me as lessons to learn and unlearn. Yes, like Mary, I said YES. And that was the best decision I have ever made. The new role made me realize that the thing I have been avoiding from the beginning is what the mission needed - for me to be an Economist. Truly, God knew what I should be, where I should be, and what was really meant for me.

In this era of uncertainties and super-fast changes both in technology and people’s lifestyles, the Marist community has to cope and make certain that the mission continues without sacrificing the resources of the present and the future. This is where we come in, the Marist ICEA. This is where I come in, the former reluctant economist now living with the motto: If it is worth doing, then it is worth doing well. All for the mission--- All to Jesus through Mary, all to Mary for Jesus, inspired by St. Marcellin. I am so grateful for all these opportunities to serve and I hope I get to inspire other Marist mission partners. Thank you NDDU. Thank you East Asia Province. Thank you ICEA. Thank you Marist Brothers of the Schools. I am forever grateful, forever a Marista.



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If you would like to share your ideas, reflections, or experiences about servant and prophetic leadership with the Commission as a result of these reflections, write to [fms.cimm@fms.it](mailto:fms.cimm@fms.it)

