Interview with Pia Mendoza

Nela Isic: This is Nela Isic interviewing Pia Mendoza on December 1, 2016 for the Benedictine University Oral History Archives. Hi, Pia.

Pia Mendoza: Hi.

NI: If you could tell me a little about yourself, where you grew up and what you are doing here at Benedictine?

PM: I was born here in Illinois. We lived in Morton Grove until I was six, then we moved to Las Vegas for a couple years and came back about seven years ago. I am going to school for medicine, right now I am pursuing a Bachelor’s degree in science. Hopefully it all goes good and I will be in medical school in the next year or two.

NI: How would you describe your ethnic cultural background?

PM: I am first generation here, I was born in the United States but my parents came from the Philippines. My background is diluted; the Philippine culture in modernized in the sense that it is picking up a lot of “American” culture, integrating it into every day lifestyle. Pilipino-American would be the general term, but I would describe myself as just Pilipino.

NI: How would you describe your religious beliefs?

PM: I am Catholic, but laid-back in a sense. We go to church every now and then and are not strict on regular attendance but definitely have to be at church on religious holidays, at least that is what I was told our religion was and I never went against it.

NI: How involved are you in your religion?

PM: I would not say I am as devout as other people, but I do try to be a part of the Catholic community. On campus, I am part of Catholic-Muslim dialogue, which allows me to look at other religions and compare them to my own. I am not part of the church in my neighborhood since we do not attend often but we do observe holidays.

NI: If you do not regularly attend church, then what inspired you to join Christian-Muslim dialogue?

PM: My friend was part of it and she thought it would be a good opportunity for me because we were so similar. That was a large
part of why I joined, but also, Dr. George-Tvt Kovc told me it was a good way to ‘get in touch’ with my religion. Being Catholic, in a Catholic affiliated school which has predominantly Catholic students, being part of the dialogue would be a great way to find out how I felt about my religion and how it related other people of the same faith.

Because I am not very involved in church, it was a way to go back to having faith play a part in my every day life as well reflecting on how my faith and the way I practice it affects my life every day.

NI: Has being in Catholic-Muslim dialogue resulted in a stronger belief in your faith?

PM: Growing up, I never questioned why I believed in the teachings. Now, being older, the fact that I keep going back to the teachings - I unconsciously make connections with stories I read in the Bible to my own experiences, which has strengthened my faith. I am able to see how everything comes together; I thought that the morals that I grew up with were passed down from my parents because of how they were raised but talking to people, going to dialogue and church, the same morals and values are reiterated.

NI: What would you say is important about your religion for your life today?

PM: I feel the Catholic religious has evolved. Before, same sex marriage, divorce, etc. was condemned but it is less conservative now. Pop culture and society is being integrated, which is important for me because of the way the world is, it is important to be open minded. A more open-minded religion, accepting of change, is important for me because things are always going at home or school which I have to adapt to. Seeing the religion going from conservative to more accepting of change sets a good example to be able to do that yourself as well.

NI: Have you had any personal experiences that have reaffirmed your faith?

PM: Like?

NI: Maybe a spiritual journey or something that may have happened in church?

PM: I do leadership projects on campus and a couple semesters ago we went on a three day faith based service trip in Chicago. We visited different sites, completed activities and religious rituals and how
they linked to our faith. One of the things that really hit me was an activity in which we were given five dollars to use to help someone in need. The first instinct is to find a homeless person with the intent to buy them food, clothes or whatever they need.

We saw a man walking around, carrying a backpack, who looked in need of help. I introduced myself to him, explained the activity we were doing and asked him if he needed anything. He told us that he did not need anything but it would mean the world to him if we all prayed for his sick mother. That opened my eyes and made me realize what it means to be Catholic – volunteering and donating money was not enough. Something as simple as a prayer and how happy it made the man was what reaffirmed my faith.

NI: That is beautiful.

What are your religious traditions or rituals?

PM: Lent is the first thing that popped into my mind. During Lent, you give something up – which was candy and TV for me when I was growing up. Now, when Lent comes around, I go back to basics. If I am too stressed out or not spending enough time with my family or friends I try to cut out the source causing the issue. What else do we do?

NI: Christmas?

PM: There is Christmas, but my family does not place an importance on going to church like everyone else, so…

NI: Do you celebrate with gifts and a tree?

PM: The family gets together and open presents Christmas Eve. Every Sunday of the month of December, different Pilipino churches hold mass in Tagalog followed by a large feast, bringing the community together. I have never seen so many Pilipino in the room. Other than that, I cannot think of any other traditions that we do because it is so ingrained in me that it is hard to pick out and talk about.

NI: Is there one that you like more than another, or less?

PM: I would not say that I do not like or appreciate any traditions but because every day in Catholic school these things were so ingrained in us that they have become second nature. For example, Lent is not as tedious as it used to be when I was younger. Growing up, the thought of Lent and people constantly asking
what I was giving up and how much longer until it ended, felt like a second New Years resolution. Now, I just see it as something that, being Catholic, you do.

NI: With your family being from the Philippines and you going to Catholic school here, is there a disconnect or are there any differences between Catholicism in the Philippines and the way it is practiced in the United States?

PM: Here, going to church is not forced upon us. During hardships, my grandfather would make a shrine in the living room and force the whole family to pray, it was longer than actual mass. Comparing my grandparents who forced us to attend church every Sunday, to my parents who spend and their Sunday resting because they work so hard throughout the week, my parents’ attitude toward religion is a lot more relaxed.

In the Philippines, everything goes back to religion. If a person does something bad it’s because they weren’t educated, their parents didn’t raise them properly and because they aren’t religious. Here, religion is on the backburner; it is more important to people who immigrated here and brought their traditions with them. My siblings, for example, go to religious education classes but they don’t want to go because they see it as a chore. Religion is dying out as a consequence of being in a place where it is not integrated into everyday life.

NI: What misconception do you feel people have about your religion? How have they affected you?

PM: Movies portray religious people as completely dependent on their religious and praying to God for everything, but that doesn’t really happen.

[laughs]

There are people who are devout enough to sacrifice everything and follow the religion to the extreme. There are guidelines but every person has their own perspective and its up to them how they want to practice. There is a stigma on religion because it is not a part of everyday life so people will say things like, “Oh, you still do that?” You’re not crazy if you have religion and if you think you will go to heaven. Growing up people would make fun of me for believing stories in the bible, but they don’t understand that I don’t take those stories literally; they are stories for a reason but they teach that God is an almighty being.
NI: Pia, are you married?

PM: No.

[laughs]

NI: Thinking about your future, would you consider marrying someone outside your religion?

PM: Yes. I know it’s an issue for people who are very religious and their families who want marriages within the same culture or religion. When I first joined Catholic-Muslim dialogue I was surprised how similar the religions were. I think it would be a breath of fresh air if I married outside my religion because I would have the opportunity to see different perspectives.

NI: I went to hear a Catholic speaker a couple days ago and he said that he learned more about his religion speaking to Muslims than through going to church, which I thought was really interesting.

PM: When I started Catholic-Muslim dialogue I thought that too. Being twenty years old, I feel like I should already know things about my religion but I find myself learning new things listening to other people’s perspectives. Sometimes it can be uncomfortable hearing another opinion because you are so stuck in believing what you have believed your entire life, which is why I think families push for marriage within religion and culture.

NI: What about children? Do you think you would raise them in your own religion or would you let them decide what they want to believe in?

PM: I think I would try to raise them in my faith because I never doubted my faith or had any opposing feelings toward it. Many of my morals and values are based on my faith so I would try to put them on that track because I think it’s a good path to be on. If they don’t like it, I don’t think I would mind. My brother is agnostic because he never gave religion a chance; I think having children with no faith would make me uncomfortable. Religion gives people hope and it helps shape them into who they become, so ideally I would like my children to be Catholic.

NI: Even if you married someone non-Catholic?

PM: If I were to get married, I don’t care about that person’s religious affiliation as long as we had the same values and morals. I value honesty, loyalty and volunteering and would want the same from my partner. I don’t care what someone else believes in or whom he calls ‘God’ as long as we can get along and we share the same moral compass. At that point I
would let my child decide which religion they wanted to affiliate with; my own, my husbands or another, but it would be nice if they had something to believe in.

NI: Have you found anything in your religious faith that you didn’t agree with or didn’t like?

PM: The idea of being condemned. My grandparents, who are more conserved than my parents, would use that as a means of making me and my siblings do things. I also don’t like the way things are written in the Bible and how people interpret it and use it to justify their actions.

NI: How does your faith view other people, non-Catholics, in terms of death and the afterlife? Does your faith that these people will also be saved?

PM: It depends whom you ask and how they were taught. For example, there are people who say that Muslims are going to hell because of how they are portrayed in the media but the likelihood of someone approaching you in the grocery store and attacking you for not being Catholic is small. There will always be people who are set in their ways who may do something stupid that would hurt people in the community that are ‘different’.

NI: Let’s say you weren’t born Catholic, is there another faith you think you may have affiliated with?

PM: I took an IDS course last semester in which we discussed different faiths. There are many principles of Buddhism that I strongly agreed with. During Catholic-Muslim dialogue I often found myself quoting Buddha [laughter]

because the teachings are very universal and practical. Buddhism strongly resonated with me. My mother is constantly telling me that I would get along with her co-worker who recently converted to Buddhism [laughter]

I feel if I weren’t Catholic I would definitely be Buddhist.

NI: You could be Catholic-Buddhist.

PM: Depending on how you define religion, Buddhism may not be a religion because there is no ‘God’. Everything in Buddhist teachings is applicable to everyday life and they are very nice.
NI: Buddhism is very self-less.

PM: Yes, which I feel applies to me because I go out of my way to volunteer and help people and is the reason I want to go into the medical field. I like taking care of people and I don’t mind the hard work.

I think Catholicism does a great job integrating that but Buddhism literally ties into every day life. Buddhism is geared toward bettering yourself to help other people whereas in Catholicism the well being community as a whole is stressed.

NI: Is there anything else you would like to add?

PM: No, unless you have other questions.

NI: Thank you so much for being here today, I really appreciate it.

PM: You’re welcome, thank you for having me.