

First priest on US Rose Parade float is an Ilonggo

By Nereo C. Lujan

On New Year's Day, Father Elly Tavarro of Cabatuan, Iloilo will make history as the first priest ever to ride on a float in the world-famous Tournament of Roses Parade in Pasadena, California.

The 51-year chaplain of St. Joseph Hospital in Orange County will be honored as one of the 23 riders on the Donate Life Rose Parade Float during the procession of flowers.

Donate Life is a nonprofit Organ and Tissue Donor Registry dedicated to saving the lives of thousands of Californians awaiting life-saving transplants. All 23 rides of its float are either organ or tissue donors.

Father Elly had donated one of his kidneys to his sister Richa 16 years ago.



Father Elly Tavarro

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"It is morally permissible to donate an organ or tissue," Father Elly wrote in an e-mail to this writer. "God does not want our organs in heaven. He doesn't need our body; He only needs our soul."

He adds: "There are about 93,000 people waiting for transplant right now here in the US. And I bet thousands are also needing organ transplant out there."

Father Elly appealed to help spread the news on organ and issue donation so that other people, like his sister Richa, may have a new lease on life.

Richa, a nurse in Saudi Arabia, began having kidney problems following the birth of her first child back in the 1980s. Then, after delivering her second child at the age of 33, her kidney problems worsened and she

experienced complete kidney failure.

Richa turned to her six siblings for help. The only person who proved to be a match as a kidney donor was Father Elly. "I suppose he was the 'chosen one' in more than one way," Richa was quoted as saying in the Healthy U, the e-newsletter of the St. Joseph Hospital, one of the patrons of Donate Life.

One of their sisters, Lilita Benitez, was working as a nurse at St. Joseph Hospital at that time. Because of renowned transplant care at that hospital, Lilita inquired whether Richa could be transplanted there, and the hospital consented.

Brother and sister journeyed to the U.S. for the life-saving surgery. On 21 December 1990, Father Elly and Richa underwent the kidney transplant procedure.

Father Elly says he remembers the day as if it were yesterday. After waking from surgery, he asked the nurse if his sister were okay. The nurse responded, "Of course she is okay, she received a holy kidney from a priest."

It was Dr. Ervin Ruzics who harvested Father Elly's kidney while it was Dr. Garo Tertzakian who transplanted it to his sister.

Both Richa and Father Elly enjoyed a full recovery. Then, just three months after the transplant, Father Elly, who was then administrator of the Holy Rosary Academy in San Agustin town in Romblon province, applied to be a chaplain at St. Joseph Hospital.

He continues to serve there today as chaplain of its Renal Center, although he remains incardinated with the Diocese of Romblon. Richa continues to work in Saudi Arabia.

Today, both brother and sister remain in great health. And even now, St. Joseph Hospital continues to ask Father Elly to share his experience and provide guidance to living organ donors.

Born in Cabatuan, Iloilo on 2 December 1955, Father Elly was ordained priest on 21 March 1981 after attending the St. Joseph Regional Seminary in Jaro, Iloilo City. He had been assigned since then to parishes in Romblon until he became chaplain and eventually administrator of the Holy Rosary Academy in 1987.

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