

Dear Friends,

Rodne Galicha is a Filipino Catholic environmental and human rights defender. He has campaigned against the destructive activities of large mining companies in key biodiversity areas in the Philippines, including critical watersheds, agricultural areas, tourism sites and island ecosystems. Fifteen years ago, when a passenger ship carrying toxic materials sank near his home island of Sibuyan, Rodne criticized contamination of the island with chemicals and fuel “affecting the life and livelihood of our people who depend mainly on the abundance of the sea.” He has spent much of his life responding to “the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor,” as Pope Francis put it in his encyclical ‘*Laudato Si*.’ In 2018, Rodne successfully campaigned against the construction of a road thru Mount Guiting-Guiting Natural Park, fearing the huge project would damage the mountain, listed as a protected area. Last November he attended the United Nations climate talks in Egypt, calling on world leaders to take more serious action on climate change, which is causing evermore severe weather in the Philippines.

Rodne’s engaging smile belies that the Philippines is regularly named the deadliest country for environmental defenders in Asia. Nineteen environmentalists were killed in 2021. Despite knowing some of those killed, Rodne refuses to yield to the threats and dangers. He says: “The risks involved in this advocacy are inevitable. Being an environment advocate is a lifelong commitment. We are all called to discover for ourselves the amazing link of our lives to nature.

The Gospel of today talks about the master of a vineyard and the tenants to whose care it was entrusted and when the master sent people to collect his share of the proceeds how they were treated and so on. The chief priests and elders who had questioned Jesus’ authority wanted to persecute Jesus for telling this story, because they felt that Jesus was talking about them. They understood that the vineyard represented Israel, the landowner God, and the son Jesus. Were they the wicked tenants? But today this parable is often linked to the current environmental crisis. Thus, we can see the landowner as God, those who destroy the earth as the greedy tenants, and environmental defenders as those who are killed for their mission of trying to protect God’s creation.

Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si*’ emphasized in 2015 that the world is not ours but God’s, who graciously entrusts the vineyard of the world to our care. But too many of us focus on our gain and treat God’s world as a commodity to be exploited without thought to the future. We see landscapes mined to destruction, water sources poisoned and other species driven to extinction. Over the centuries, how many prophets in our Christian communities have been rejected, abused and even killed? Who are the greedy tenants in today’s world, destroying God’s creation and its defenders?

The parable suggests that each of us is responsible for a portion of the “vineyard”. Have we provided shelter to those who are homeless, and fed those who are hungry? Have we provided a means of livelihood for those who have no means of living? These are questions that we should ponder. God gives us everything we need to make our vineyard flourish. We can manage the vineyard as we choose – but we do not own it. What fruits will we produce for the Lord?

Your friend in Jesus  
Msgr. Zach