

## **Florentino and the Mystic Dwarves**

*In cahoots with three imaginary smaller folk has cost one Philippine judge his job and cast the nation's judiciary in a comical light. Sam Chambers meets up with "the healing judge"*



**T**he atmosphere reeks surrealism. Judge Floro Florentino smiles radiantly as a bunch of Munchkin look-alikes down on their luck gaze up at him with something close to reverence.

It's been a while since his lordship has been at the bar and this bar, in the middle of a run-down sector of Manila, is not the type of bar he is used to lording it over.

The Philippine judiciary has oft been the butt of many a joke. But never before has one judge created so much mirth out of such an august body as Judge Floro Florentino and his three sidekicks Luis, Armand and Angel.

Florentino and the mystic dwarves might sound like a concept album but is in fact the strangest of tales from a nation famous for its superstitions. The trial judge lost his appeal to keep his job last month with the Supreme Court's 72-page ruling stating that Florentino's "dalliance" with Luis, Armand and Angel - the three aforementioned mystic dwarves - showed he had a "medically disabling condition of the mind" that rendered him "unfit to

discharge the functions of his office" which in turn could "erode the public's esteem of the judiciary" and make it an "object of ridicule". An indignant Floro has stated publicly he is the victim of injustice and is the patsy in this dwarf conspiracy.

Maintaining he is fond of a glass of red wine we arrange to meet up at what seems like the most apt place to discuss matters mini homo sapiens, the Hobbit Bar on Mabene Street, in the Manila district of Malate. Charitably offering employment for the vertically challenged, the Hobbit Bar has been a tourist attraction for more than ten years.

Judge Florentino peers over the bar while a bottle of Australian Shiraz is ordered but shows no sign of recognition. It seems that Luis, Armand and Angel are not among the diminutive presences here to serve us.

Moments later a pudgy hand holding a 2003 vintage appears out of nowhere; two glasses follow as if rising from the bar through a gap in the gravity.

Looking 10 years younger than his 53 years, Florentino comes across as remarkably lucid. He rambles for sure, in a high-pitched tone, often going off on tangents, yet the psychosis the Supreme Court claims he has is not immediately apparent.

Fame, or infamy, clearly is something this otherwise shy man likes. He comes armed to the interview with 300 printed pages of clippings and court appeals. He says with no small relish how he and his three smaller cohorts have appeared in over 66 media titles plus more than a thousand blogs.

One such blogger describes Florentino as the Filipino X-Man for his efforts to rid the country's judiciary of corruption. In 1995 a Supreme Court commission found that more than 50% of judges received bribes, something Florentino - "the only healing judge In the Philippines" -

has been determined to wipe out. "I am not a faith healer," he admonishes, "I am gifted."

His own suburb of Manila, Malabon, where he was briefly a judge is a coveted location in which to reside, he says, as within a month a judge could be a millionaire, with the starting price for any judicial decision being 50,000 pesos. "Court starts at 11 am; at 11.05 [the judges] go for golf." Likewise, the Court of Appeals is shown no mercy by Florentino: "They say it is 85% corrupt," he muses, "It is 100% corrupt."

Born In 1953, Floro went to a seminary in 1965 before transferring to a Jesuit institution a couple of years later. He entered the legal profession, and then, he says, his life changed forever on the day his father died, June 2, 1983. On that day Luis, Armand and Angel made themselves known to Robert, Florentino's youngest brother whose mental age is 11. "My brother because of his innocence can see them," he says, recounting how the dwarves had told him he would have healing and psychic powers. At first, he says he was sceptical. An avid gambler -- the horse racing coupons are mixed in with his press clippings -- the three dwarves told him to get into cockfighting. He bought 13 cockerels and made 21,000 pesos and "suddenly believed them".

Since then he claims to have healed many people, saying how his hands are golden and impart heat to the afflicted.

The dwarves or spiritual guides as Florentino prefers them to be called take many different forms. Luis is the "king of kings", "God's angel" while Armand is a beautiful boy, who like Luis has wings and Angel is their sister. Florentino has only seen Luis once - out on a rock on an island in the middle of the Philippine archipelago. Luis communicates and uses his powers via violet and white lights.

Though at times he bristles at the term psychic, Florentino insists he is the country's number five psychic ever. Number one? Ferdinand Marcos, apparently.

He predicted Joseph 'Erap' Estrada's presidential downfall, prayed that present incumbent Gloria Macapagal Arroyo would survive her endless political battles. Looking ahead though he reckons Arroyo's downfall is coming and the nation will suffer as a result.

He'll also have you believe he is a bilocator -- someone who can be seen in two different places at the same time, which he acknowledges is also a trick the devil is rather proficient at playing.

For such powers Florentino tells how he has had to make sacrifices including remaining single otherwise he would lose his gift of healing - "That's in the Book of Revelations," he adds. He glances over his shoulder at a child laughing nearby. "You know it's painful for me not to have a kid. That's why I am the Filipino martyr."

Florentino was appointed on November 5, 1998, as the country's youngest judge. It was not the first time he'd tried to become one -- the state had failed him three years earlier for mental reasons only for him to be allowed an independent, private mental assessment that cleared him.

His reign as a judge was as bizarre as it was short.

Sessions would start with readings from the Book of Revelations; on Fridays this psychic would change from his blue robes to black to recharge his powers and in between hearings he'd provide healing sessions, even for other judges, as well as consulting his trio of imaginary friends.

Sadly, such unorthodoxy brought a swift end to his career. He was suspended in July 1999 and so began a seven-year battle to get reinstated, with more than 100 motions tabled finally crumbling in August with the Supreme Court.

He was paid 1.1 million pesos back pay, over half of which has already gone on debts.

He lists the names of senior judges who have in the past come to him for healing purposes. Quoting Pope John Paul II - "An excuse is worse and more terrible than a lie, for an excuse is a lie guarded" - Florentino says these same people turned on him for political reasons, using his paranormal "gifts" as the excuse to get rid of him.

"This is the first time in world judicial history that this happened. The American and other Constitutions provide for dismissal or removal of judges, jurists and magistrates because of graft, corruption, misconduct, or bad behaviour; but resignation - only for those medically incapacitated. In the Philippines, this is the first - for since 1901, the Philippine Supreme Court never ever dismissed or removed a judge because of belief in the paranormal or religion," he insists.

Despite his seemingly kind appearance Florentino has a darker mission, avenging those who corrupt the legal system and this has led him to be dubbed an angel of death, a term he does not dispute. At this point I recall that the dwarves of the Philippines, or duendes as they are more commonly known, are not like the loveable dwarves of Snow White. Rather they resemble the little red riding hood in the movie "Don't Look Now", full of malice and violent intent.

Eight judges who he deems corrupt have all been struck with serious illnesses, three of them dying. He has, he confesses, been psychically "inflicting illnesses" upon his tormentors, even going so far as to ensure one of them gave birth to a child with epilepsy.

"Armand, Luis and Angel's role is a never ending battle against 'blacks' or evil; a spiritual battle like the angels versus Lucifer. Right now Satan is winning, God is losing.

All our leaders have 666 on their heads from the president down, the Supreme Court, everywhere," he says in his mild, yet animated, manner. "My mission is healing the wounds of the judiciary."

His more immediate goal is to appeal the Supreme Court decision as early as next week. He intends to file a disbarment case against Chief Justice Hilario Davide Jnr for delaying his case for so long. "I am asking for a job. I am asking for justice," says the spiritual crusader. Is this just a tall tale of short people? Or is that Luis reaching up to take my credit card? Filipino judges, you have been warned.