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**Amen, I Say to You He Will Surely Not Lose
His Reward (Mt 10:42)
A LOOK AT THE "REWARD" AND ITS
FILIPINO CONTEXT**

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Abstract

Grace is God's Self-gift through Christ in the Spirit and the acceptance of this divine gift. The reward is the participation in the creative and transforming love of God for all. It is a sharing in God's divine life now and for all eternity. Reward is the depth meaning of human life expressed in the love for God and neighbour and the ultimate reward is the abundant life in the heavenly kingdom. An understanding of the term "reward" is realized by looking at the usage of this term particularly in Matthew's gospel, the Church teaching's definition and explanation of "reward" and its practical understanding in the faith-life experiences of the Filipino Catholics.

"You are glorified in the assembly of your Holy Ones for in crowning their merits you are crowning your own gifts."¹

In Christian Theology the term "reward" is closely associated with the term "merit"² that refers "to a quality of human conduct; namely, its worthiness of divine recompense by way of reward."³ While

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¹Roman Missal, Prefatio I de Sanctis; Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2006. Hereafter referred to as CCC with paragraph number.

²Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologia*, Question 114.

³Carl J. Peter, "Merit," *New Dictionary of Theology*, Walmington: Michael Glazier, 1987, 652.

reward is an important Church teaching very little has been written on this in the recent years.⁴

In ordinary parlance a reward is a familiar commercial and business term. This is directly related to the question of justice which seeks that every service rendered deserves a just compensation in terms of payment or wages. Such is true in the commercial relationship between a master and a servant. The wages are due as the servant's work is fulfilled. This comes at the completion of an agreed contract or transaction and the accomplishment of work assigned to the servant.

However, this commercial notion about reward reduced to an object or a thing does not relate to the biblical sense and the Church's teaching. Another wrong idea is that a reward is always automatic since God is assumed to compensate human beings for the good acts they do or that moral actions are always worthy of reward.

Grace is God's Self-gift through Christ in the Spirit and the acceptance of this divine gift. The reward is the participation in the creative and transforming love of God. This refers to the sharing in God's divine life now and for all eternity. Therefore, to receive a reward is the depth meaning of human life expressed in the love for God and neighbour and the ultimate reward is the abundant life in the heavenly kingdom.

Context

Part of the problem in understanding Jesus' promise of reward in the Gospels is the Filipinos' notion of divine reward or recompense influenced by certain local cultural mentality. This paper begins by looking at this contextual problem.

Reward is rarely seen as grace which is God's Self-gift in the divine initiative to convey his love to his people and to call them to a life with him. Grace is often misinterpreted as material blessings or good

⁴Prudentio de Letter, *De Ratione Meriti: Secundum Sanctum Thomam*, Romae: Apud Aedes Universitatis Gregorianae, 1939. Joseph Peter Warrykow, *God's Grace and Human Action: 'Merit' in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975. Blaine Charette, *The Theme of Recompense in Matthew's Gospel*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Press, 1992. The Catholic Church and Lutheran World Federation Lutherans have recently released their joint declaration on justification. See the Joint Declaration of the Doctrine of Justification. The full text is available at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html (accessed August 24, 2011). *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000.

fortune. This weak understanding assumes that people are passive recipients of God's graces and often leads to the fatalist understanding or "bahala na ang Diyos."⁵ This sense hints at the powerlessness of the human being against an impersonal and arbitrary God. Thus, this unsettling belief espouses that grace is purely God's work and the human free will does not come into play thereby reducing human beings to passive recipients of divine providence. A Filipino phrase "hulog ng langit" best describes God's graces as tangible blessings which fall down from heaven that do not necessitate personal cooperation with God's gift.

Another confusing thought is to look at the Church, the institution, as a monopoly that produces and markets the product called grace, with the bishops, priests and the religious congregations as the distributors and sales persons, the churches and chapels serve as the sales outlets and the general body of the faithful merely the consumer population. Some people put great stress on their individual pious devotions and hope that God will bless and reward their private prayerful dispositions. This is why devotions and novenas are sometimes thought of vehicles to reap "rewards" or means to earn God's endless blessings. Oftentimes these rewards are perceived as a stroke of luck due to one's piety.

The value of prayers is not at all discounted. Human response to God's grace does not merely practice pious devotions but one is called for an active and free participation and sharing in the mission of Jesus Christ. The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines⁶ recognized that in the country "worship has unfortunately been often separated from the totality of life."⁷ Prayer is still often relegated to mere external observance of religious conventions.⁸ There is an apparent schism between prayer-worship on one side, and the moral life on the other. Some people believe that God's grace is gained invariably through piety. Despite notable efforts at integrating prayer and the moral life such as the thrust for justice, many Filipinos still seem to consider the two as dichotomy, completely apart. Many do

⁵See Wilfredo C. Paguio, *Filipino Cultural Values for the Apostolate*, Makati: St Paul's Publications, 1991, 134-37.

⁶Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines*, Manila: CBCP, 1992. Hereafter referred to as PCP II with paragraph number.

⁷PCP II, 167.

⁸Episcopal Commission on Catechesis and Catholic Education, *Catechism for Filipino Catholics* 1162, Manila: CBCP, 1997. Hereafter referred to as CFC with paragraph number.

not recognize how their Christian faith and worship influence their moral life and decision making and their perfection in charity is celebrated in the prayer and liturgy of the Church.

Another Filipino mentality that leads to a weak understanding of grace is the “utang na loob” attitude. Some people think that if they do good works God owes them a reward. The real temptation here is to liken God to Santa Claus who gives gifts to those who are nice throughout the year. Reward can be likened to earning “brownie points.” The “utang na loob” or indebtedness imposes on God automatic recompense for any praiseworthy deed. The relationship between God and the human being is based on a legal contract wherein God owes a reward for any meritorious act. This misconception reduces God to a vending machine and puts great emphasis on reaping reward and not on the good act itself.

A better understanding of the theological term reward has to begin by looking at the usage of the word “reward” particularly in Matthew’s gospel. While the Matthean texts are central to this study, the second part of the paper looks into the Church teachings explaining reward and finally, it explains “reward” in view of the experiences of the Filipino Catholics today.

1. “Reward” in Matthew’s Gospel

Matthew’s gospel employs seven times the word “reward” and its synonym “recompense.” These gospel texts are (1.1.) Persecution of the prophets (Mt 5:12/Lk 6:23); (1.2.) Love of Enemies (Mt 5:46/Lk 6:32-36); (1.3.) Teachings on Righteousness (Mt 6:1) and the specific teachings on the deeds of righteousness (1.3.1) Almsgiving (Mt 6:2ff); (1.3.2.) Praying (Mt 6:5) and (1.3.3.) Fasting (Mt 6:18); and finally (1.4) Acts of Charity (Mt 10:40-42).

1.1. Persecution of Prophets (Mt 5:12)

“Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven. Thus they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Mt 5:12/Lk 6:23)

Mt 5:12 is the last of the eight beatitudes which covers the teaching on persecution. The beatitudes contain Jesus’ moral teachings which he enjoins his disciples to follow. These state how the happiness of a particular person or group is achieved through the reversal of the world’s conventional values and the assurance of a reward. Happiness does not necessarily mean a state of tranquillity but rather it refers to the good or virtue one presently possesses and carries with the promise of exaltation.

Mt 5:12 consists of two sentences. The first sentence states that "they should rejoice and be glad because the reward is great in heaven" while the second describes how Jesus' disciples have to endure the same fate of the prophets of old. Persecution and martyrdom are the common fate of the prophets. The disciples must expect the same fate of the persecuted prophets but their role is greater than anyone of the prophets.

The disciples are persecuted for their commitment to righteousness and faithfulness to the will of God revealed by Jesus. The preceding verse (v. 11) describes in ideal terms the traits and characteristics of Jesus' followers: "Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you [falsely] because of me." Those who suffer for the sake of righteousness endure it in the name of Jesus Christ.

Jesus challenges his disciples to a higher mission than simply continuing the role of the prophets. He calls them to bear witness to his person and mission of bringing about the presence of God's kingdom in this world. They will be persecuted because of their faith. They respond to persecution not by giving up, not by accommodation, nor by retaliation. The beatitude proclaims that such persecution is a cause for joy. Rejoice and be glad and the next clause explains this behaviour because "your reward will be great in heaven." The promised reward will be revealed in full glory and splendour in heaven.

Various interpretations have been given to "heaven." One explanation points to heaven as a future reality, "imminent but otherworldly reality, where the present world will no longer exist."⁹ Another insists that it does not only refer to the future, as distinctive from the already begun kingdom of God. The kingdom of heaven has already taken place in Jesus.

Jesus begins his public ministry with the declaration that the kingdom of heaven is already at hand (Mt 4:17). Heaven has arrived on earth in Jesus and becomes a living reality in him. The disciples are called to faithful service as they participate in the building up of the heavenly kingdom already present here on earth. Their fidelity to their mission intensifies their communion with Jesus Christ.

The kingdom of heaven is intimately tied to the heavenly Father's paternal care for all especially his children. Jesus has come to reveal the presence of our Father in heaven in his very person and mission.

⁹David Noel Freedman, ed., *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000, 564.

The reward promised to those who are persecuted because of Christ can be seen in the heavenly Father's constant love for his children. He instructs his disciples to call God as their "Abba" or "Father" in whom they can depend for material and spiritual gifts (Mt 5:9-15). Heaven is a relationship of love with the Father and his children taking place in Jesus Christ.

1.2. Love of Enemies (Mt 5:46)

"For if you love those who love you, what recompense will you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same?" (Mt 5:46/Lk 6:32-36).

In ancient times love was aimed at one's neighbour or fellow countryman. Jesus criticized this ordinary behaviour of reciprocal love which he says is practiced even by tax collectors who though part of the Israel community were considered outcasts and hated by their own people because they collected taxes more than what is legal. They "profited by collecting more, and so increased the oppressive tax burden. They were very unpopular and social outcasts."¹⁰

In the preceding verse (v. 44) Jesus demanded that his disciples go beyond mutual love which was the ordinary measure of love customarily directed to those who love you. This love was merely a natural trait. Reciprocity was "a common behaviour, binding parties in obligation and securing the patron-client status of each. Indiscriminate loving, part of the greater righteousness required of disciples is a countercultural practice, undermining, not securing, social hierarchies and obligation."¹¹ Verse 46 queries what recompense will you have if you love those who love you? Even the outcast can easily perform that kind of love.

The disciples have to do more. Jesus, the first to teach humankind that authentic love is to go beyond one's circle and direct it to strangers, one's enemies and persecutors, raises natural love to a supernatural level. He teaches not tolerance but charity and assures the disciple "that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust" (Mt 5:45). God's love given to all is free and gratuitous. The disciples must imitate the all-embracing love of the heavenly Father in their life and in conduct.

Christian love is not just about altruism, but it is a participation in God's life and love that constantly seeks out the happiness of his

¹⁰Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins. A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000, 156.

¹¹Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 156.

children. By this kind of love the disciples will be perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect (Mt 5:48).

1.3. Teaching About Righteousness: Almsgiving (Mt 6:2-4), Fasting (Mt 6: 5-6) and Prayer (Mt 6:16-18)

"Take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them; otherwise, you will have no recompense from your heavenly Father" (Mt 6:1).

The teaching on righteousness focuses not only on the good act but also on the motivation that comes with it. The verse begins with the phrase "take care" which can also mean "beware" serves as a stern warning to Jesus' disciples who may be doing good works but their motivation is not directed to God or for the good of others but simply for personal vainglory. Jesus admonishes those who perform righteous acts in order for others to see them and gain public approval and insists to do pious acts in secret.

Verse 1 focuses on righteousness required of all who hope to enter heaven and is further developed in the succeeding verses on concrete religious observances such as (1.3.1.) almsgiving (vv2-4), (1.3.2) praying (vv 5-6) and (1.3.3.) fasting (vv 16-18). The emphasis lies primarily on the relation of the real intent of the person and the pious acts. Jesus heavily criticized those who perform religious acts so "that people might see them." These people have no recompense from God.

"Recompense" is synonymous to "reward" which means something given for a good deed. Jesus warns against performing religious duties and making people into their spectators in order to impress them. There is no heavenly reward for such actions no matter how righteous or pious they may be since the motivation is not true worship of God but it is for public acclaim. Acts of piety should not be done for vain display but out of true devotion to God.

1.3.1. Almsgiving: "When you give alms, do not blow a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets to win the praise of others. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward" (Mt 6:2).

Almsgiving to the poor is one of the principal works of charity but Jesus criticizes the ostentation in almsgiving as the "hypocrites do in the synagogues."

Hypocrite is a "neutral word in Greek usage meaning actor."¹² The theatrical actor plays a role assigned to him and an excellent

¹²Agustine Stock, OSB, *The Method and Message of Matthew*, Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1994, 97; Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 160; John P. Meier,

performance wins praise from the audience. The almsgivers are likened to hypocrites because they publicize their almsgiving. "Some would drop coins 'in the streets' to attract the poor and so gain attention. Jesus caricatures this publicity-seeking by depicting a trumpet being blown."¹³

The verb "praise" in 6:2 replaces the verb "seen" in 6:1 to sharpen the attack on the almsgiver who wants to be glorified. Alms are given not because of one's concern either for the needy nor for God's sake but their inner motivation pejoratively described is to gain public praise. "He is a humbug. This is the sense of the word here. It is above all the hope of winning applause that is stigmatized."¹⁴ "Hypocrites steal the gratitude and praise due to God, the giver and sustainer of life (5:45; 6:25-34). Public applause is their only reward."¹⁵

Jesus ends his teaching on almsgiving with the clause "Amen, I say to you." This phrase is a unique characteristic of Jesus' teaching that shows his authority to declare the truth. The words "amen" and "truly" invest "the words that follow with peculiar solemnity."¹⁶ Jesus' exclusive use of these terms at the beginning of important sayings highlights his solemn teaching affirmation which carries with it Christological implication.¹⁷

The Greek verb "receive" "[*apechousin*]" is a set term for a receipt of payment in full; it expresses perfectly the crass commercial mentality of the hypocrites."¹⁸ Jesus declares a verdict on those who give alms so that they may win public praise and honour. They have already received their full reward, a receipt as payment for the transaction, and this is all that they shall get. The transaction is completed. There is nothing more to expect.

Jesus enjoins the disciples to practice almsgiving, an important part of their piety but not like the manner of the hypocrites whose aim is

Matthew, Dublin: Veritas Publication, 1980, 58; See Robert Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church Under Persecution*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994, 103; Francis Wright Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981, 165-66; Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999, 226.

¹³Meier, *Matthew*, 58.

¹⁴Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 165.

¹⁵Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 160.

¹⁶Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1995, 271.

¹⁷Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins and Dermot Lane, *The New Dictionary of Theology*, Wilmington: Michael Glazier Inc, 1987, 109.

¹⁸Meier, *Matthew*, 58.

to win public acclaim for themselves, and not a true worship of God. He instructs them to practice almsgiving "in secret." "But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing, so that your almsgiving may be secret" (Mt 6:3-4a).

1.3.2. *Teaching about Prayer:* "When you pray do not be like the hypocrites who love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on street corners so that others may see them. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward" (Mt 6:5).

Jesus actually praying to his Father and teaching his disciples the prayer the "Our Father" (Mt 6:9-13/Lk 11:2-4) are important gospel themes. However, in the teaching about prayer (Mt 6:5) the hypocrites are criticized for their false piety. In the preceding verse praying is introduced in a similar fashion as almsgiving which can also be an occasion for ostentation. The hypocrites who pray are like "actors" performing their roles to gain acclaim and recognition from their spectators. They stand and pray in the synagogues and in visible locations such as the street corners where they have a captive audience. The problem is not about praying as such but the hypocrites whose inner motivation, though known only to God, is to be noticed and glorified by others. Prayer becomes an occasion to show-off their piety. "Prayer ceases to express love for God (the first commandment cf. 22:37), but, like almsgiving, serves the one praying."¹⁹

One should not pray because one thinks that prayers can earn God's favour. Prayer is an expression of one's gratitude and trust and dependence on the Father who already knows what one needs even before it is asked (6:8, 32). Jesus encourages his disciples to pray in secret (Mt 6:6).

Again, the teaching on praying ends with the clause "Amen, I say to you." Jesus chastises those who pray so that others may see their piety have already received their reward. This is all that they are ever going to have.

1.3.3. *Teaching About Fasting:* "When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites. They neglect their appearance, so that they may appear to others to be fasting. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward" (Mt 6:16).

After Jesus' teaching on almsgiving (6:2-4) and prayer (6:5-15), his instruction on fasting offers a third warning against those who seek public recognition for their piety rather than an expression of faith in God.

¹⁹Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 161-62.

Fasting is a religious practice which has a special place in the individual's worship of God associated with mourning and repentance, healing diseases, and casting out demons.²⁰ It includes abstaining from food and other forms of mortification. "Matthew sees fasting as a concrete expression of conversion and dependence on 'our Father.'"²¹ It is a time of drawing closer to God by demonstrating one's commitment to him²² and expressing intense longing for the coming of God's salvation.²³

The Old Testament prophets reject fasting which did not reflect an inner hunger for social justice (Is 58:3-9). Jesus again attacks the hypocrites for their religious practice of fasting which has been turned into public spectacle (Mt 6:16a). They are once again acting out a role as in a theatre performance seeking public approval because they practice fasting in so extreme manner that they are reputed to be holy persons. They look gloomy and neglect their appearances by disfiguring their faces to become invisible or unrecognizable so that they may appear to be fasting to others but they are not really serious about fasting. Their intent is to be recognized for their extreme piety. The disfigurement is done by putting on sackcloth; covering their faces; putting ashes and being unkempt to make the person appear hideous.²⁴ These practices "may well evoke the original sense of 'hypocrites' as actors in the theatre; actors typically wore large theatrical masks over their faces."²⁵ "Ironically, they made themselves unrecognizable in trying to be recognized."²⁶ Their motivation in disfiguring their faces is to be seen by others and earn admiration from them. "These people who fast are like dismal drug-addicts, hooked on the opium of men's approval. They get exactly what they crave, and nothing more."²⁷

The hypocrites' fasting is not a true expression of sorrow or a manifestation of true devotion to God and the seriousness with which sacrifices are offered. They are motivated by the desire to win the admiration of their neighbours and reputation for their extraordinary piety. Social recognition and prestige is all the reward they will ever get.

²⁰Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 170.

²¹Meier, *Matthew*, 63.

²²Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 227.

²³Meier, *Matthew*, 63.

²⁴Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 178-79.

²⁵Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 226.

²⁶Gundry, *Matthew A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church*, 111.

²⁷Meier, *Matthew*, 63.

A true fast avoids the traditional signs of fasting, such as the omission of washing and of anointing oneself, actions performed to give a sense of well-being. This does not involve any new hypocrisy or deception with regard to one's fellows, the external appearance of joy and well-being is a true mirror of the disciple's inner state. In short: a genuine fast in the sight of God can never take place in the sight of men.²⁸

The teaching on fasting ends in the same manner as the almsgiving and praying with the phrase "Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward." As seen in 6:1, 2, and 5 the intent of the hypocrites' external display is to be seen by others and to seek their praise. Fasting, an act of worship has also become theatrical. Jesus tells his disciples that when they fast, they have to conceal it and make no public display of their devotion. They should take the greatest care to disguise piety so that fasting may not be seen by others but by the heavenly Father who sees everything in secret.

On the other hand, Jesus tells his disciples to show forth their good deeds and to give gratitude and praise to the Father. "Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father" (Mt 5:16). The key to this paradox teaching lies in the interior motivation of the good deed. The disciple is to do good works that are visible in the world in order to "glorify the heavenly Father" (5:16).

There must be nothing ostentatious, no public exhibition of piety; and there must be no motive of winning admiration, but only of pleasing God and seeking no reward except that which he may give. Deeds done to impress others, to win a reputation for outstanding godliness, are not of any value in the eyes of God. Actions good in themselves can be a form of self-seeking, if they are done to win approval and admiration from other people. Such a motive is far removed from the spirit of letting your light shine for all to see so that they glorify your Father who is in heaven; it is more like seeking the spotlight, so that the observers may glorify you.²⁹

1.4. Rewards (Mt 10:40-42)

Mt 10:40-42 is the conclusion which covers the theme of discipleship. The disciples must be willing to forsake everything and follow Jesus not of simply walking behind him but sharing in his life. As the

²⁸Meier, *Matthew*, 63.

²⁹Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 164.

Master goes, so goes the disciples — in the paradoxical path of gain through loss and of life through death.

1.4.1. “Whoever receives you receives me, whoever receives me receives the one who sent me” (Mt 10:40): From the bleak assurance of the disciples’ persecution Jesus now concludes his instructions with a reward upon those who will receive them. This serves “as a powerful word of encouragement for [all] disciples, reassuring them that there is no task of greater significance than the ministry to which Jesus has called them.”³⁰

Mt 10:14 speaks of occasions of rejections: “Whoever will not receive you or listen to your words — go outside that house or town and shake the dust from your feet.” They should be under no illusions regarding the difficulty of their task and the certainty that there will be people who will oppose them bitterly. But this is not the whole story. There are those who will receive his disciples.

Verse 40 points to those who will receive the disciples. In such a short verse the term receive is four times repeated. It may initially be explained in terms of attending to or welcoming the itinerant messengers as guests and provide them with honour³¹ or hospitality. Hospitality, shared not only with one’s own kin, but with strangers as well, is exercised by sharing both material resources such as housing and food.³² “The virtue of hospitality... is enumerated among the works of charity by which men will be judged.”³³ Those who are summoned and sent by Jesus can hope to be treated with hospitality.

However, “receive” has depth meaning which is more than cordial welcome and material benefits. “To receive” implies a personal encounter between the disciples and the hearers of their message who are actively involved in listening and accepting the good news, recognizing Jesus in his disciples, and committing themselves to Jesus Christ.³⁴ “Receive” is the acceptance of the spiritual resources the disciples bring with them as they continue the proclamation of the presence of God’s reign (10:7) already begun in the ministry of Jesus Christ. Those who accept them and their message receive a reward.

³⁰Dorothy Jean Weaver, “Matthew’s Missionary Discourse: A Literary Critical Analysis,” in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series* 38, Sheffield Academic Press, 1990, 123. See Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew A Commentary, Matthew 1-12*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004, 497.

³¹Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 269.

³²Meier, *Matthew*, 115.

³³John L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1981, 374.

³⁴Meier, *Matthew*, 115.

Whoever accepts the disciples accepts Christ and the one who sent him — who is the heavenly Father.

Verse 40 reflects the dynamic relationship of the Son and the Father, "the One who sent me." Extending a receptive ear to Jesus's disciples is to receive Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man and ultimately, the Father himself. This formulates "the basic Christian belief in the solidarity of the disciples with Christ and through him in their fellowship with God."³⁵

The rewards due to the disciples will be shared by those who paid serious attention to their message. "The receiver will have the same reward as the one sent! This is because the reward is the message itself, and the message bearer, who himself was a receiver, expects no pay other than the joy of sharing the message" (10:8).³⁶ "Receiving the disciples for what they are is also putting oneself to the benefits of the promises of the kingdom where one can be confident of receiving from the Father the same reward as the disciples themselves, that is, the kingdom itself."³⁷

1.4.2. *"Whoever receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and whoever receives a righteous man because he is righteous will receive a righteous man's reward" (Mt 10:41).*

The three important terms in verse 41 are namely "receive," "prophet," and "righteous." Repeating words in a singular gospel verse is uncommon and when this takes happens it is of utmost significance. "Receive" occurs four times, while "prophet" and "righteous" both three times each.

Verse 41 has 2 parallel parts. The first part is about receiving a prophet because he is a prophet and will receive a prophet's reward and the other half speaks of receiving a righteous man because he is righteous and will receive a righteous man's reward.

An Old Testament prophet was God's spokesperson but in the early Christian communities prophets were known as charismatic figures.³⁸ Unlike the prophets who prophesied about the coming of Christ and of the messianic kingdom, in the New Testament the prophetic mission comes from a relationship with Jesus Christ. The

³⁵Leopold Sabourin, SJ, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, Bombay: St Paul Publication, 1982, 542.

³⁶George T. Montague, *Companion God: A Cross-Cultural Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, New York: Paulist Press, 1989, 134.

³⁷Daniel Patte, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1987, 156.

³⁸Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 270.

prophets have seen and heard for themselves what God desires for his people to know through the reality of salvation in Jesus Christ. They proclaim the good news so that others too may come to believe and follow Jesus Christ.

Repeating righteous or just man after prophet may well be a requisite that the true prophet must also be a just man. The titles, prophet and righteous, are used interchangeably in this passage. Jesus' disciples are the prophets greater than the prophets of old since they do not simply proclaim the gospel but are righteous people who perform the message of the good news they make known.

Righteousness can be best understood in a relational sense.³⁹ It denotes a "covenant relationship"⁴⁰ between God and his people. Thus, the one who upholds, and therefore participates in this covenant relationship is designated 'righteous.'⁴¹

Jesus promises that anyone who receives a prophet will receive a prophet's reward and anyone who receives a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward. The term "receive" has two meanings in this verse.

As indicated in verse 40 the first meaning of the term "to receive" a prophet or a righteous person is about hospitality to the itinerant missionary and more importantly an acceptance of Jesus' disciples as prophets and righteous people. But receiving the prophets is so much more than simply providing material generosity (cf. v. 40). It is "docility to the apostolic message which is that of Christ and his Father. It is a meritorious reception of one who speaks on behalf of God (prophet) if it is accorded not from merely natural politeness but from a supernatural motive recognizing God's truth or God's sanctity in the person of his ministers."⁴² "Receive" means paying close attention and accepting the disciples' message and committing to Christ by carrying out his message of righteousness in one's life.

The second usage of the term "receive" is associated and connected to the reward particularly "a prophet's reward" and "a righteous man's reward." While the reward may be narrowly deemed in view of the provisions for one's necessities in life,⁴³ the reward is more than any tangible reality.

³⁹*The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Volume IV, Nashville: Abingdon, 1962, 91-99.

⁴⁰*The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Volume IV, 91.

⁴¹*The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Volume IV, 91.

⁴²Alexander Jones, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, New York: Sheed and Ward, 1965, 131.

⁴³Stock, *The Method and Message of Matthew*, 179.

God rewards both the prophet and those who accept the prophet and his message.⁴⁴ The prophet's reward is to understand, believe and proclaim the message of Jesus Christ as in the case of John the Baptist, the norm of the New Testament prophet. He translates the Law in terms of lived experience (Mt 14:4; Lk 3:11-14). He announces the imminence of divine wrath and of salvation (Mt 3:2, 8). In particular, John knew Jesus — the one who is at hand and he points him out (Jn 1:26, 31). "Through him speak all the prophets who have rendered testimony to Jesus."⁴⁵

Reward is not given to a passive hearer. It is laid down for the Christian prophet and is shared to those who are actively involved in listening to the message. It is the ability to recognize and understand God's Self-gift in the mystery of salvation in Jesus Christ and commit themselves to him by proclaiming and testifying to this good news to others. It embraces a committed role in propagating Christ's message to the ends of the earth. As Jesus tells his disciples "What I say to you in the darkness speak in the light; what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops" (Mt 10:27).

The righteous man accepts God's sovereignty and walks according to the ways of God. He acts upon God's desire through his devotion to God and loving service to others. The reward is the good conduct that comes from the encounter and acceptance of God's Self-gift in Jesus Christ and the loving response to this gift.

To welcome such a man is to agree with his basic position. It is to recognize the importance of goodness and to be ready to bring about the goodness oneself. Such a receptor of a good man will be treated as a good man, he will receive the reward (or the wage) befitting a good man, Being a true servant of God means among other things being able to perceive the work of God in others and to respond to it.⁴⁶

1.4.3. *"And whoever gives only a cup of cold water to one of these little ones to drink because he is a disciple — amen, I say to you he will surely not lose his reward" (Mt 10:42).*

Various interpretations are given on the "little ones." The adjective "little" describes the hearers' lack of faith (Mt 8:26; 13:5; 13:12; 14:31; 17:20); to those who have just recently come to believe in Jesus (Mt 18:6; 18:10; 18:14) and to children (Mt 9:24-25; 18:2; 18:3) since they are

⁴⁴Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 270.

⁴⁵Xavier Leon-Dufour, *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1973, 473.

⁴⁶Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, 270.

the epitome of dependence and powerlessness. Some interpret that the “little ones” may allude to the children⁴⁷ since Jesus shows deep interest and concern for them.

In view of the preceding verse, it is quite possible that Jesus refers to his disciples as the “little ones” since they are without earthly power. “They are deliberately without anything when they go in mission (10:10)”⁴⁸ and depend solely on God.

The word “give” in this verse means to hand over or to bestow without expecting anything in return. The object given is “water to drink.” This may seem to be the most inconsequential gift anyone can give. While the gift may initially appear insignificant Jesus describes that the water is “cold” and this description transforms the quality of the gift as refreshing and invigorating especially to the weary traveller.

The text indicates that the cup of cold water is given to a disciple because he belongs to Jesus and this act will not lose a reward. A cup of cold water is the smallest conceivable gift given to his followers and given with the correct motivation does not go unnoticed. This will be duly noted and fittingly rewarded by the One who has an eye even for sparrows.

“Giving a cup of cold water to drink” to one of the itinerant preachers can be explained in terms of welcome or hospitality.⁴⁹ “Accepting into one’s home the missionaries who have abandoned their own homes and security to bring Christ’s message,”⁵⁰ and providing the small helpful services and the material assistance because they are Christ’s disciples. The good deed done for the disciples is done to Christ himself.

Giving a cup of cold water, similar to “receiving a prophet and a righteous man,” is not only about hospitality and material benefits for a weary traveller but the cup of cold water is given because the itinerant preacher belongs to Jesus. The giver recognizes the identity of the prophet as Jesus’ disciple by paying close attention to the message proclaimed. The giver, in turn, accepts, proclaims and carries out the good news.

The last clause of the verse is again introduced with Jesus’ emphatic word “Amen.” The one who gives a cup of cold water to

⁴⁷Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 331.

⁴⁸Patte, *The Gospel According to Matthew* 156; Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 332.

⁴⁹Bruner, *Matthew A Commentary Matthew 1-12*, 497.

⁵⁰Keener. *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 332.

Jesus' disciple will surely not lose a reward. The phrase "will surely not lose" is the guarantee and the promise of a reward to one who gives a cup of cold water to one of Jesus' followers. For those who accept the disciple by attending to the smallest needs of the humblest of disciples and more importantly by paying attentively to the message will receive a reward, just as in the case of those who respond to a prophet or a righteous man (v.41).

The fruit of the act of charity is actually present in the act. The act of giving a cup of cold water to one of the disciples signifies that the giver recognizes that the little ones are Christ's and they belong to him. The reward is faith in Christ because of the disciples' message and way of life. "The rewards of discipleship are not for the disciples alone but for all who welcome them because they are Christ's."⁵¹

2. The Reward is Grace

While the Church repeatedly speaks of the eternal reward as the experience of the fullness of life in the heavenly banquet, she also highlights the truth that the "reward" of a good act is already built-into the reality of the act itself. The reward is grace that is the participation and sharing in the divine life through Jesus Christ, the Word Incarnate and in the Spirit and communion with other people in the life today.

2.1. Grace is a Personal Relationship and Dialogue with God

God loves first and he makes a startling offer. He calls all to partake and accept the divine loving communion through Jesus Christ, the eternal word of God made man and the Holy Spirit. The divine purpose of his Self-gift is to allow the person to be constantly recreated and renewed. "God's offer of self makes it possible for human beings to participate in the inner relationships of the Trinity."⁵² The Father and the Son are one (Jn 10:30) united by love, their Spirit.⁵³ The Father, through the Son and in the Holy Spirit draws people to himself. The response to God's love begins by accepting God's love. The response has to be an active and on-going creative personal "yes" to God's constant call. God gives his Son Jesus Christ and Spirit to empower people to reach beyond them and be open to others.

⁵¹Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 251.

⁵²Elizabeth Dreyer, *Manifestations of Grace*, Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1990, 167.

⁵³CFC 1329; CCC 254.

God, the eternal lover, is incessantly interested in all and calls all to respond constantly to him in love. Divine love “for every individual is not new or old, but always simply there. The call to intimate and eternal friendship and like all invitations to friendship and intimacy is a completely gratuitous offer.”⁵⁴

God’s Self-gift is mediated through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ who is the highpoint and absolute centre of God’s Self-giving to human beings and the response to God. In the mystery of incarnation Jesus united himself with every human being⁵⁵ and in the paschal mystery⁵⁶ of his “blessed passion, and resurrection from the dead and glorious ascension, whereby ‘dying, he destroyed our death, and rising, restored our life’”⁵⁷ Jesus offered his whole life as a perfect sacrifice for the salvation of all. He calls his disciples to imitate and participate in his perfect sacrificial death and rising. He admonishes them that they can only bear fruit only when they die and rise with him.

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World affirms that

As an innocent lamb he merited life for us by his blood which he freely shed. In him God reconciled us to himself and to one another, freeing us from the bondage of the devil and of sin, so that each one of us could say with the apostle: “the Son of God loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20). By suffering for us he not only gave us an example so that we might follow in his footsteps, but he also opened up a way. If we follow this path, life and death are made holy and acquire a new meaning.⁵⁸

⁵⁴Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins and Dermot Lane, *The New Dictionary of Theology*, Wilmington: Michael Glazier Inc, 1987, 445.

⁵⁵*Gaudium et Spes*, 22 in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar & Post Conciliar Documents*. Ed. A. Flannery (1975). Hereafter referred to as GS with paragraph number.

⁵⁶The paschal mystery, while centered in the passion, death and resurrection Christ, has a wider meaning extending to the incarnation and to Jesus’ life and ministry. It also forms part of the larger narrative pertaining to God’s providential plan of creation, redemption and sanctification. We have also seen that it pertains not only to God’s economic plan, but also to the internal relations within the Trinity itself... Christ’s paschal mystery must be seen as an integral plan of that providential plan, one that finds its source not only in God’s external relations with his creation, but also in God’s own immanent self-relations.” D. Billy and J. Keating, *The Eucharist and Moral Living*, New York: Paulist Press, 2006, 22.

⁵⁷*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 5 in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar & Post Conciliar Documents*. Ed. A. Flannery (1975). Cf. Easter Preface of the Roman Missal.

⁵⁸GS, 22.

The Paschal Mystery is the foundation of the life and the heart of the Christian faith. The Second Plenary of the Philippines explains how in the Paschal Mystery

Jesus brought us in his Passover from suffering to glory, from death to life, from our human sinfulness to his grace. In this mystery we as his disciples need to share, finding in it the rhythm and pattern of our own life... By losing our life this way, we save it and grow in our discipleship of Jesus.⁵⁹

Jesus' paschal mystery reveals the true meaning of his mission and Christian discipleship. It requires a basic change in a person's way of life. In following Jesus, the disciples are called to metanoia, a fundamental conversion in life that moves one out of egoism and self-centredness to a life that is dedicated to the loving service of God and others. This means that the disciples are "not only saved by Christ and the Spirit — God working in us — but we share in their redeeming work — God working through us."⁶⁰ The *Catechism for Filipino Catholics* states that "we are called by Christ to share in his sacrifice" through the disciples' own sacrifices.⁶¹ Jesus often tells his disciples, "Come follow me" not in the sense of walking behind him but imitating and sharing in his life, death and resurrection. The participation in Jesus' Paschal Mystery expressed through the daily little sacrifices and self-denial because of love for God and others reflect Jesus' self-emptying love for all.

Jesus promises to send the Spirit of love who endows the capacity to love God and others. The love of the Triune God penetrates the person's innermost being through the Holy Spirit who comes to dwell bringing all to Jesus' intimate relationship with the Father and giving the confidence to call God "Abba Father" (Rom 8:15-16, Gal 4:6-7). "Grace is favor, the free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God, adoptive sons, partakers of the divine nature and of eternal life."⁶² GS 22 asserts that, "Christ has risen again, destroying death by his death, and has given life abundantly to us so that, becoming sons in the Son, we may cry out in the Spirit: Abba, Father!" The Holy Spirit inspires all to be able to have faith, hope and love⁶³ and the receptivity to the movement of the indwelling Spirit incorporates all into the divine life.

⁵⁹PCP II, 85-86.

⁶⁰CFC, 1312.

⁶¹CFC, 575.

⁶²CCC, 1996.

⁶³*The Christian Faith*, ed. J. Neuner and J. Dupuis, New York: Alba House, 2001, no. 1953. Hereafter referred to as ND with paragraph number.

The promise of a reward is grace: the experience of genuine human life where God draws all into loving communion with Him through the free human cooperation with God's awakening call. God's desire is to perpetuate this state of grace and increase of grace but he does not do this without human free cooperation. This intimate relationship with God is a life-long process that needs to be confirmed and constantly strengthened by human free cooperation with God's grace.⁶⁴ By virtue of the transforming grace present, people are now able to do something valuable in the eyes of God and hence gain a new meaning for human existence. The reward is the good will of the divine lover in trying to provide for his beloved all that love suggests.

Cooperation, in the last analysis, is measured by God's love. The more we open ourselves to grace by a loving acceptance of God's grace, the more it flowers in us. Or, in other words, grace never comes into full bloom in a life of tepidity and indifference; for then no increase in grace can be merited... the greater the love, the greater the grace, and consequently, the greater the merit... or by lovingly accepting grace, we grow in grace and thereby to greater love.⁶⁵

The preface [Weekdays IV] of the foregoing Eucharistic Prayer proclaims the truth that God desires growth in grace. "You have no need of our praise. Yet our desire to thank you is itself your gift. Our prayer of thanksgiving adds nothing to your greatness, but makes us grow in your grace, through Jesus Christ our Lord." The good works through the grace of God and merits of Jesus, enables one to receive an increase of grace.⁶⁶ This means God is rewarding his own gifts by bringing one closer to him. The fruit that comes from the good act is considered further gifts from God. The increase of grace effects an ongoing inner transformation and renewal making the person better and more loving before God and others. God graces His gifts until the end for He who has begun a good work will not leave it unfinished. The good acts have been made possible with God's grace and so persons are not to rely on themselves but instead depend solely on the Lord.

Growth in grace, therefore, is not a matter of quantifying graces but is the deepening and intensifying of the intimacy with God and other fellow human beings. Growth comes from faithfully receiving love and freely giving love. God's gift gives more than ever before greater

⁶⁴CFC, 1618.

⁶⁵Peter Fransen, SJ, *The New Life of Grace*, Herder and Herder, 1972, 220.

⁶⁶ND, 1982.

capacity to receive and give love to God and to one's neighbour and this opens to an increase in glory.

As one's relationship with God grows in intimacy, one begins to see things from God's perspective, to love as God loves. This does not mean that I give up my will, but my will becomes ever more conditioned to desire the good... God's self-gift enables us to discover who God is and to become like God. The incarnation assists us in making manifest in the life of Jesus what it means to become like God. The gospel stories offer us in broad strokes the shape of a life lived in union with God's will.⁶⁷

The sharing in the divine gift transforms the meaning of Christian life that "affects our conscious life, our existence and not just our being; it affects our very manner of life in the world and is thus not to be thought of as a 'layer that is placed carefully on top of nature so that the two interpenetrate as little as possible'... nature is enveloped in grace and grace bears upon our inmost reality."⁶⁸ Grace gives an ever new perspective in the way one lives one's life touching the entire being: the way one thinks, loves and trusts.

2.2. Grace is Communion with Others

Participation in the divine grace brings humans to a loving relationship with other people. Communion with others stems from, is inspired by and leads to the communion with God. Life in communion with other people is made possible by the love of God revealed through Christ and the Spirit.

Jesus reveals the new profound meaning of love at the Last Supper. He identifies the cup as "the new covenant in my blood which will be shed for you" (Lk 22:20). The commandment of love reflects Jesus' sacrifice on the cross and rising from the dead for the salvation of all. His offering manifests the depth of divine love that hopefully moves people to cooperate with the divine desire.

Mt 25:31-46, the conclusion of Jesus' final discourse, centres on the theme of love for others by which all will be judged in the coming parousia. The disciples have to recognize Jesus Christ among the lowly and to love them. Jesus, the Emmanuel the God who is with us, is with his people especially the poor.

⁶⁷Brennan Hill, *An Offer You Can't Refuse*, Denville: Dimension Books, 1975, 168.

⁶⁸James Carpenter, *Nature and Grace Toward An Integral Perspective*, New York: Crossroad, 1988, 58.

Verses 35-36 describe the corporal acts of mercy expected from the disciples. Jesus looks upon every act of kindness done for others, however modest, as kindness done to him. Those who carry out his teaching are the righteous ones who live a life consistent with the divine purpose. "This way of life begins with following Jesus and continues as an ongoing demonstration of God's love and mercy for all people, especially for the poor and marginalized, those not valued by the dominant society obsessed with power and wealth."⁶⁹ The Spirit breathes charity in the hearts of the disciples who are called "concretely to bring forth fruits of grace in deeds of sacrificial love."⁷⁰

The experience of divine grace must lead to action for justice, peace and dignity for all people. Christian disciples called to participate in Jesus' sacrifice have to work for social justice in behalf of the poor and oppressed. This life of grace is a dynamic life that is not afraid to confront justice and risk one's life for others. The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines has stressed the social demands of the love command on the Christian community, "marked by a love of preference for the poor."⁷¹ Christian love can be authentic only if it awakens individuals to their social and moral responsibilities.

3. A Deepened Understanding of Grace in the Filipino Context

Certain Filipino words and cultural practices emphasizing interpersonal relationships that lead to both personal and social transformations can be used in explaining the true essence of grace as a participation and cooperation with the divine life and solidarity with the poor. These stress the need for active involvement in the life of the other and the call to communion which are contrasted with self-centeredness or *maka-sarili*, or "to mind one's business and be indifferent to others or *"kanya-kanya."*

Filipinos are basically relational people with strong family ties and bonds of friendship. They always have the need to be actively involved in the life of others or *"pakikipag-ugnayan sa iba."* Understanding grace as relational is an important step in the maturing of the Filipino Christian Faith. Filipino Catholics have to comprehend that grace is *"pakikipag-ugnayan"* or a relationship with the living Triune God — the Father, Son, and Spirit. They have to appreciate the reality of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of the Father and

⁶⁹Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 492.

⁷⁰Komonchak, et. al, *The New Dictionary of Theology*, 448.

⁷¹PCP II, 278, 435-37.

the Risen Christ — the reality of Grace⁷² poured into their hearts. Grace is God's Self-gift giving new life in the Spirit through Christ that calls for free human cooperation. The other Filipino term "pakikibahagi" or active involvement or cooperation in the life of another corrects the notion of being passive in one's relationship with God. When this word is connected to the work of God or "pakikibahagi sa banal na buhay ng Diyos,"⁷³ it refers to the human involvement in the holiness of God or God's life. "Pakikipag-ugnayan" and "pakikibahagi" necessitate human cooperation in establishing the presence of God's kingdom in this world today.

The reality of God's saving grace embodied in the community is seen especially in the Filipino cultural practice of "bayanihan." "Bayanihan" comes from the Filipino word "bayani" which means "hero." The "bayani" is not simply an individual but a group of people interested in the welfare of a person or of the entire community. As a practice "bayanihan" clearly opposes individualism and materialism that calculates and anticipates personal gain or "what's in it for me?" for every good deed. "Bayanihan" captures the essence or spirit of cooperation with the other members of the community to help a fellow member who is in need. It, therefore, asserts the spirit of selflessness that comes from the interior desire to give assistance to the impoverished or one who is faced with difficulty or tragedy.

From the historical perspective the word "bayanihan" comes from the experience of concerted effort in the community when one of its members had to move one's hut to a new location. The men freely volunteered their services to help the community member in need. They did this not for any personal gain nor were they expecting anything in return. They literally carried the hut on their shoulders and bore the weight of the burden their "kabababayan" or fellow Filipino was confronted with. "Bayanihan" would hopefully ease the pain of the one who was in dire need.

The "bayanihan" in the current Philippine context comes to fore especially in times of calamities or tragedy. For example, when a typhoon creates havoc in the country destroying life and property thereby affecting the lives of many people, Filipinos come together to help alleviate the pain and difficulties their fellow brethren are experiencing. Their participation is expressed in terms of praying for

⁷²CFC, 1331.

⁷³CFC, 2145.

the victims, donating goods, or helping rebuild the community. While this Filipino cultural practice is noteworthy “bayanihan” has to go beyond simply reacting or responding to social tragedy either caused by natural or man-made calamities. “Bayanihan” or care for the neighbour has to become a part of the daily Filipino Christian way of life.

The Filipino vocabulary and practices such pakikipag-ugnayan, pakikibahagi and “bayanihan” can help Filipinos understand the meaning of grace as a participation in the divine life that empowers one to carry out Jesus’ teaching of loving service for one’s neighbour. These words and practices bring out the image of cooperation in the work of Christ in the world and in the building of the kingdom of God in the world today amidst human struggles and difficulties. Relationship with God demands an active participation in alleviating their fellow countrymen from their inhumane and miserable situations.

The sharing in the divine life results in growth in faith. This is the reward. It involves both “pagbababgong-loob” or interior change or conversion and “pagbabago ng lipunan” or social transformation. Grace should be understood as the presence of the Trinity in the lives of the Filipino Catholics but not just in personal piety or rituals but in the interpersonal relationships. They have to be alert in the task of building a truly Christian community through a genuine concern for others or “damayan” or human solidarity or “pakikipagkapwa-tao,” and grounded in faith or “pagkamakadiyos.”⁷⁴ Enhancing these interpersonal relationships grounded in Faith with other Filipinos is perhaps the way to achieve authentic social transformation in the Philippines today.

Concluding Remarks

The reward of a righteous act is grace, a sharing and participation in the life of God. God freely and gratuitously takes the initiative to offer His very Self, a gift of a relationship through Christ and the Spirit and calls all to receive His love and share in the divine nature.

Sharing in the divine life is to become more loving persons and moving closer to the fullness of life with other people in the community. Giving oneself to others in love is totally beyond human beings’ unaided reach. Human existence is modified by the perpetual offer of grace and the human free cooperation with the divine grace. Apart from God’s Self-gift human beings can do nothing (Jn 15:5). “... left to itself humanity can perform some naturally good acts but that

⁷⁴CFC, 792.

left to itself it cannot love or forgive with the universality to which the gospel of Jesus Christ calls his disciples. Left to their natural resources human beings spontaneously love their own — their friends, benefactors, and at least some of their relatives."⁷⁵ Human beings do not spontaneously love the stranger, the alien and the poor. God has loved us first (1 Jn 4:10) and who in so doing has enabled people to love others.

The acceptance of God's Self-gift leads to full authentic humanity and the ultimate meaning of human life. Sharing in the divine life divinizes and humanizes people. They are elevated to the divine life as we share in God's gratuitous Self-gift in the communion of love in the Triune God. They become our true selves, authentically human as they cooperate with the love poured by the divine love into their hearts. When they love God and others they become more human, more personal and more wholly their true selves because of divine grace. As God's gift of Self becomes the ultimate expression of God's love for humanity, so too does human self-giving love becomes the norm of free human behaviour.

The experience of the supernatural grace perfects human experience by teaching the human heart to hope for and love others with a love which imitates God's universal love. The divine love empowers human beings "to love more universally than they can left to their finite natural resources. By making them more Godlike, the sanctifying grace of charity enables them to live more perfectly human and humane lives."⁷⁶

⁷⁵Donald Gelpi, *The Gracing of Human Experience: Rethinking the Relation between Nature and Grace*, Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2001, 322.

⁷⁶Donald Gelpi, *The Gracing of Human Experience*, 350.