

## **POPULAR PIETY AND LITURGICAL INCULTURATION IN THE PHILIPPINES: THE WEDDING OF FAITH AND CULTURE**

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### **Abstract**

In the Philippines, the concrete outcome of the interaction between the Catholic Faith and culture is the performance of the rites of popular piety. Most of these rites focus on devotions to Christ, Mary, and the saints. Properly guided, these rites may contribute to a more dynamic, active, participative liturgical worship in the Church — an ideal envisaged by the *Constitution on the Liturgy* of the Second Vatican Council. While the rites of popular piety engender virtues such as hope, a sense of the Cross in daily life, and fortitude, much can be done so that: 1) they do not degenerate into superstitious and magical forms of worship, and 2) they may be developed into potential vehicles for social and structural change.

Among Filipinos, a deeper sense of God and community is expressed through the attendance at official church services. These would include mass on Sundays and holy days, the rites celebrated on the occasion of baptism and confirmation, weddings, and funerals. These officially prescribed activities, however, are supplemented and, in some instances, even overshadowed by various rites of popular piety.

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From a liturgical perspective, liturgical inculturation may be defined as “the process of inserting the texts and rites of the liturgy into the framework of the local culture.”<sup>1</sup> This process involves the assimilation by the liturgy of local cultural patterns such as the people’s thought, language, value, ritual, symbolic, and artistic pattern.<sup>2</sup>

One simply cannot overstate the necessity of liturgical inculturation. Otherwise, people’s experience of God will be pushed to the fringes of their cultural experience, making any ritual encounter with God relatively meaningless or ineffectual. Fidelity to the Gospel and fidelity to the human person calls for vigorous efforts at inculturating the Faith that makes our forms and expressions in worship at once both distinctly Filipino and authentically Christian.<sup>3</sup> The National Catechetical Directory for the Philippines writes: “On the one hand, the Christian message must be expressed through images, symbols, rites that are indigenous to Philippine culture, and on the other, authentic Filipino cultural values, attitudes and practices must be analyzed for their basic Christian dimensions.”<sup>4</sup>

In the Philippines, the concrete outcome of this interaction between the Faith and culture is the performance of the rites of popular piety. For most Filipino Catholics today the practice of the Faith is mostly centered on the performance of these rites.<sup>5</sup> The Philippine bishops write in their “Pastoral Exhortation on Philippine Culture”:

... the Church as it has developed in the Philippines... is a truly Filipino Church. There has been a real wedding of faith and culture ... and their integration is quite substantial. Thus, when we consider our people’s deep religiosity and its manifestations in popular devotions, rituals and celebrations, we see that integration of our faith and our culture has taken place.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Anscar J. Chupungco, *Liturgical Inculturation: Sacramentals, Religiosity, and Catechesis*, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991, 30.

<sup>2</sup>Anscar J. Chupungco, *Liturgical Inculturation*, 30.

<sup>3</sup>It should be said, however, that the Gospel itself is recognized as universal. Translations into local languages should not obscure that fact.

<sup>4</sup>See Episcopal Commission on Education and Religious Instruction (ECERI), *Maturing in Christian Faith, The National Catechetical Directory for the Philippines*, Pasay: St Paul Publications, 1985, no. 426. (Hereafter cited as NCDP).

<sup>5</sup>Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), *The Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines*, Manila: Don Bosco Press, 1992, no. 13. (Hereafter cited as PCP II).

<sup>6</sup>CBCP, “Pastoral Exhortation on Philippine Culture,” *Boletín Eclesiástico de Filipinas* 75 (1999) 332.

Rendered by other terms and phrases such as “popular religiosity,” “folk Catholicism,” “popular religion,” the term “popular piety” can be defined as a particular way of practicing the Catholic Faith in the form of rites and rituals that enjoy wide mass appeal.<sup>7</sup> While these rites can be distinguished in varying degrees from official Church practice, they are in many respects rooted in popular religious traditions.<sup>8</sup> They are, then, “less orthodox and less subject to official control,” making it more genuinely reflective of “the religious aspirations of the people.”<sup>9</sup>

“There are elements of authentic Christian faith in popular religion,” eminent theologian of popular religion and moral philosopher Vitaliano R. Gorospe, SJ, acknowledges, “just as there are elements of popular religion in the lives of most of us who are theologically trained and hierarchically faithful.”<sup>10</sup> This observation indicates that Filipino popular piety is not an exclusively mass-based religious phenomenon, but may include even members of the so-called economic and intellectual elite. Such a popular predisposition constitutes, it would appear, a collective Filipino religious consciousness.

The liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed.<sup>11</sup> This presumes that there are other forms of Church

<sup>7</sup>Ricardo W. Rieth uses the term “people’s religion” to refer to “a way of living the contents of the Christian faith as summarized in the Apostolic Creed and expressed through images, devotional practices, gestures, rituals, and feelings that are intimately connected to popular culture.” See Ricardo W. Rieth, “The Lutheran Confessions and Popular Religiosity in Latin America,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 45, 2 (Summer 2006) 134.

<sup>8</sup>Social scientists prefer the term “folk Catholicism” since distinctions have been made between official, non-official, folk and popular religion. See Benigno P. Beltran, *The Christology of the Inarticulate: An Inquiry into the Filipino Understanding of Jesus the Christ*, Manila: Divine Word Publications, 1987, 18-19. Cf. Chupungco, *Liturgical Inculturation*, 100-101. Vitaliano R. Gorospe, SJ cautions against the use of the term “folk catholicism” which appears to be a derogatory non-Asian, social scientific construct referring to the uneducated class. See his “The Supposed Dialogue between Christian Faith and Filipino Popular Religion,” *Docete* 22, 97 (April-June 1999) 26-30. Frank Lynch, SJ, on the other hand, explains that one may find in any organized religion components which are nonofficial or *folk*, as distinguished from the official. The term describes reported, reasonably well-established facts, and is not meant to be used disparagingly. See his “Folk Catholicism in the Philippines,” in *Society, Culture and the Filipino*, ed. Mary R. Hollsteiner, Quezon City: IPC, 1984, 123.

<sup>9</sup>McCoy, “Popular Religions in Latin America,” *America*, 159, 20 (December 31, 1988) 535.

<sup>10</sup>Gorospe, “The Supposed Dialogue between Christian Faith and Filipino Popular Religion,” 27.

<sup>11</sup>*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy,” in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, New York: Guild Press, 1966, no. 12. (Hereafter cited as SC).

activity, e.g., preaching, the social apostolate, catechesis, etc., which are basic constituents of the total reality of the Church, and that these activities should ideally culminate in the Church's liturgical worship. The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* itself acknowledges that even the spiritual life of the faithful is not limited solely to the participation in the liturgy.<sup>12</sup>

It can be said, therefore, that the integral worship of the Church consists of both the official and the popular forms of prayer. Apart from the liturgy, there are other forms of worship.

### **The Forms of Filipino Popular Piety**

An examination of the more common forms of Filipino popular piety is needed not only for a clearer understanding of these rites, but to recognize the implications for religious instruction for a more inculturated, officially grounded, liturgical education.

It should be noted first that Filipino popular piety is not a phenomenon entirely unique to Philippine culture. It is a local development of two sources, namely, the Latin American form of popular piety which itself is a transplanted and transformed kind of peninsular Spanish Catholicism.<sup>13</sup> In other words, most of the traditional practices of Filipino popular piety can be traced to Spanish folk Catholicism, "but have received local elaboration and embellishment."<sup>14</sup> Conquered peoples, particularly those who were forced to adopt the religion of the conqueror, remake it to fit their own worldview.<sup>15</sup> Chupungco explains:

Although several countries in Europe and Latin America can claim to be the centers of popular religiosity, the Philippines as a former colony of Spain shares and preserves faithfully, in modified form, much of its colonizers' religious traditions. As the foremost Filipino historian, H. de la Costa affirms that the Filipino religious culture as we know it today began with the coming of the first Spanish missionaries.<sup>16</sup>

The Filipino penchant for rites, ceremonies, and celebrations is well-known. "Fiestas, processions, pilgrimages, novenas, innumerable devotional practices both individual and communitarian, mark the concrete religious practice of most Filipinos."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>SC, no. 10.

<sup>13</sup>Lynch, "Folk Catholicism in the Philippines," 124

<sup>14</sup>Lynch, "Folk Catholicism in the Philippines," 125.

<sup>15</sup>John A. McCoy, "Popular Religion in Latin America," 535.

<sup>16</sup>Chupungco, *Liturgical Inculturation*, 103. See Horacio de la Costa, "Religious Renewal: An Asian View," *Philippine Studies* 20 (1972) 93-94.

<sup>17</sup>NCDP, no. 319.

These different rites can be classified under four categories: 1) devotions to Christ, Mary, and the saints in the form of pilgrimages, patronal feasts, processions, popular devotions, and novenas; 2) the rites related to the liturgical year; 3) practices related to the celebration of the sacraments and other Christian rites such as funerals; and 4) institutions and sacred objects connected with various forms of popular piety. We will briefly look at the more common devotions to Christ, the Blessed Virgin, and the saints.

### **Devotions to Christ**

The more common devotions to Christ include visits to the Blessed Sacrament, holy hour devotions, and devotion to the Sacred Heart on first Fridays. Predominant images of Christ that many Filipino Catholics consider personally significant, however, are the Infant Jesus of Christmas and the *Sto. Niño* (The Holy Child), *Misas de gallo* (dawn masses before Christmas) draw more people to church than any other religious event, with the possible exception of the town fiesta high mass, or the Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services during Holy Week.<sup>18</sup>

The image of the *Sto. Niño* is a permanent fixture in every Catholic household, business and commercial establishment, even government agencies and offices that include police stations, health centres and the like. The special attention Christ gave to children (Mt 18:2-4) and the Filipinos' typical indulgent affection toward them are given concrete expression by the Filipino Catholic devotion to the Child Jesus. While the dialogue between Faith and culture presumes mutual reciprocity and enrichment, Christian Faith must also exercise a critical function vis-a-vis culture. Hence, while our devotion to the *Sto. Niño* evokes a profound dimension in our sense of family, we must be cautious that our devotion does not easily degenerate into a trivialization of faith in the Christ Child.<sup>19</sup> This is evident, for example, when doting devotees doll up their images like mannequins in a fashion show.<sup>20</sup> Whether it be in the Belen (the Nativity scene) during Christmas, or an image in many Catholic homes, devotion to the Child Jesus should always be a reminder that God makes Himself

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<sup>18</sup>Lynch, "Folk Catholicism in the Philippines," 125.

<sup>19</sup>Amalia Teresita B. Rosana, "Towards Maturity in the Faith: A Critique of Filipino Images of Christ," in *Man's Search for God: An Introduction to Theology*, ed. Ma. Christina A. Astorga, Ph.D. and Amalia Teresita B. Rosana, Manila: ORP ADMU, 1990, 231.

<sup>20</sup>Amalia Teresita B. Rosana, "Towards Maturity in the Faith," 231.

accessible through human mediation, “for by His Incarnation the Son of God has united himself in some fashion with every man,”<sup>21</sup> and willed to save humankind by assuming the human condition.<sup>22</sup>

Christ as Suffering Servant is depicted through the popular Filipino images of *Padre Hesus Nazareno* (Jesus the Nazarene), the *Sto. Entierro* (The Dead Christ), and the Sacred Heart.<sup>23</sup> The devotion to all these images which speak of quiet suffering in the face of persecution and terrible human ordeal, manifests the Filipino’s admirable fortitude in the face of trial and adversity. Devotion to the Suffering Christ awakens the hero-martyr element in the Filipino psyche that encourages such positive values as *tibay ng loob* (courage), *pakikiramay* (solidarity in suffering, compassion), and *pagtitimpi* (restraint). Human suffering, therefore, should not be an end in itself, but viewed as the cost of one’s ongoing commitment to Gospel values, as this is evident in the Beatitudes (Mt 5:6, 10-11), for instance. Otherwise, religious instruction may unduly encourage an excessive sentimentalism on the suffering and death of Christ. This, in turn, could engender passivity and fatalism in the face of difficulty — two attitudes that consign everything to God’s will. Fixation on the Suffering Christ not only overlooks the centrality of his resurrection to the Christian Faith, but may also result in some distorted understanding of divine justice (or retribution) that metes out punishment for sin in the form of suffering.<sup>24</sup>

Lent is the solemn time for Catholics to remember and relive the sufferings of Christ. The climactic tragedy of the life of Christ is re-enacted in many official and non-official liturgical ceremonies — the washing of the apostles’ feet, the *via crucis* (way of the cross), the *siete palabras* (seven last words), and the Easter Sunday rites.<sup>25</sup> Short

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<sup>21</sup>*Gaudium et Spes*, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, New York: Guild Press, 1966, nos. 22, 11. (Hereafter cited as GS).

<sup>22</sup>Ma. Victoria Parco, “The Prophetic Vocation of Therese of Lisieux” (Masters Thesis Graduate School, ADMU, 1986), 198.

<sup>23</sup>Episcopal Commission on Catechesis and Catholic Education (ECCCE), *Catechism for Filipino Catholics*, new ed., enl., Manila: Words & Life Publications, 1997, nos. 467-68. (Hereafter cited as CFC).

<sup>24</sup>For a discussion of current theological literature on soteriology, see Michael Demetrius H. Asis, “Suffering, Salvation, and The Filipino: Francis Schüssler Fiorenza’s Theology of Divine Emancipatory Solidarity in the Context of Poverty and Marginalization,” *Budhi* 17, 3 (December 2013) 20-49.

<sup>25</sup>Despite the still “popular edge” that Good Friday rites enjoy over Easter Sunday services in terms of attendance, participation in Easter Sunday rites have steadily improved in recent years.

theatrical plays known as the *cenaculo* present the history of salvation through biblical stories and also passages from the life of Christ, a favourite being the episode of Judas and the thirty pieces of silver.<sup>26</sup> Found only in the Philippines is the chanting before home altars of the verses of the *Pasyon* (known in the vernacular as *Pabasa*) — “a book written in seven major Filipino languages consisting of 3,150 rhymed stanzas of five lines each.”<sup>27</sup> Much of the *Pasyon* is a detailed account of, and reflective, prayerful meditation on, the passion of Christ.<sup>28</sup>

The Christmas and Lenten seasons remain the two highpoints of the Filipino Catholic liturgical calendar.<sup>29</sup>

### Devotions to Mary

Many Filipino Catholics learn a great deal about their Faith from their devotion to Mary. The *CFC* describes this profound love for the Blessed Virgin:

The outstanding characteristic of the Church in the Philippines is to be a “*pueblo amante de Maria*” — a people in love with Mary... [Filipinos approach Christ] *with and through Mary*. Devotion to Mary has always been intimately intertwined with Christ. The two central mysteries of our Faith in Christ, mystery of the Incarnation celebrated at Christmas, and of Redemption during Holy Week, are deeply marked by the veneration of Mary.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Alfredo Roces and Grace Roces, *Culture Shock*, QC: Graphic Arts Center Publishing Co., 1992, 68.

<sup>27</sup>Chupungco, *Liturgical Inculturation*, 104. Cf. Rene Javellana, SJ, *Casaysayan nang Pasiong Mahal*, Quezon City: ADMU Press, 1988, 3-42.

<sup>28</sup>These local passion narratives, however, were given a more liberationist interpretation, and had been instrumental in inspiring the birth of peasant resistance movements. This is the subject of Rafael C. Iletto's well-known study about how the *Pasyon* provided 19<sup>th</sup> century lowland *Tagalog* movements with a language for articulating their own values and ideals, particularly in view of their hopes for social emancipation and political liberation. See Jose Mario C. Francisco, “Christian Symbols and Rituals in Philippine Society,” *Pulso* 7 (June 1991) 16. See Rafael C. Iletto, *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840-1910*, Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Press, 1979.

<sup>29</sup>There is, however, a gap between devotion to the Child Jesus and the Suffering Christ. The man Jesus is completely forgotten and ignored. The image of the Sto. Niño, the Suffering Christ, or Mary figure prominently in every Filipino house blessing, or house altar, for instance. “The life teachings of the man Jesus are overshadowed by religio-cultural traditions.” See Alan J. Delovato, “Images of Christ in Filipino Culture and Atonement Experiences: A Case in the Contextualization of the Gospel Message,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 15, 1 (April 2001) 146. Doesn't this call for a re-thinking of our Catholic moral education, to include — beyond Christmas and Lent — the words and deeds of Jesus as a man as the basis of our moral exhortations?

<sup>30</sup>CFC, nos. 45-46. This is vividly expressed in the dawn masses or *Simbang Gabi* (*Misa de Gallo* or *de Aguinaldo*) and the *panunuluyan* during Christmastime, and the *Salubong* (encounter) of Easter Sunday morning. See CFC, no. 46; NCDP, no. 242.

Filipino Marian devotion can be largely traced to Filipino Catholicism's Hispanic roots and Philippine society's high esteem and respect for women, especially mothers — a trait cultivated by the Christian faith itself.<sup>31</sup> Marian titles abound in the Philippines: Our Lady of the Rosary, Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, Mother of Perpetual Help, Lady of Lourdes, Lady of Carmel, Lady of Sorrows, etc. Parishes are named after Mary, and *Maria* is the first name of many Catholic girls.

Mary is a significant figure in both Christmas and Holy Week. The search for an inn by Mary and her husband, Joseph, is re-enacted during Christmas. Images of the Blessed Virgin are central attractions in Lenten processions. *The Mater Dolorosa* (Mother of Sorrows) image, in particular, figures prominently and complements the equally popular Lenten image of the Suffering Christ, the *Sto. Entierro*. In the merry month of May is held the ever popular *Flores de Mayo*, where children daily offer flowers to the Blessed Mother. This festivity, however, together with the *Santacruzán* (the search for the Holy Cross), has practically degenerated into a pageant whose social purpose is to give public tribute to female pulchritude, more than anything else. Beyond doubt, it is still the praying of the rosary which constitutes the most popular Marian devotion. A fortunate development with regard to recent catechesis on the rosary is the explicit stress on the Christological orientation of what is explicitly, in tradition and verbal form, a characteristically Marian devotion.<sup>32</sup>

The ambivalence of Church hierarchy toward popular devotions is understandable. Many such devotions, in fact, may not carry the seal of ecclesiastical approval at all. Admitted abuses and exaggerations, for example, have not been unusual in popular Marian piety.<sup>33</sup> This, however, does not in any way diminish the genuine and well-founded basis for Marian devotion.<sup>34</sup> Faith life for many will be substantially weakened and less vibrant if Marian devotion is altogether discouraged.<sup>35</sup> The object of Marian veneration is always the worship of God. While this may not be always true in concrete

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<sup>31</sup>NCDP, no. 43.

<sup>32</sup>From its origin with St. Dominic and the Lourdes apparitions, it would seem the Rosary is *more* Marian than “appears to be.”

<sup>33</sup>A very common inappropriate practice (fortunately decreasing in recent popularity, especially in urban areas), was the praying of the rosary in churches even while masses were going on.

<sup>34</sup>NCDP, no. 44.

<sup>35</sup>NCDP, no. 44.



practice, it cannot be doubted that devotion to Mary has been an existentially meaningful faith expression for so many believers who have, in many instances, deepened their love of Christ and the Father through Marian devotion. Para-liturgies, many of them having Marian themes, have effectively improved the liturgical and prayer life of many Filipino Catholic communities. It is perhaps the deep conviction of Filipino Catholics that in Mary God is present in a special way, which continues to make her the object of the Church's deep love and veneration.

### **Devotion to the Saints**

Often the object of virulent attacks from various non-Catholic church groups, the Church's devotions to saints is one facet of its faith practice that can be described as characteristically Catholic. While the emulation of outstanding men and women of character have always been endorsed by whole societies, governments, and different political persuasions, the Catholic Church has often been accused of attributing almost god-like powers to ordinary human beings.

The Filipino penchant for the supernatural and the spectacular can be noted in this outwardly naïve faith expression. Popular Filipino religiosity has often been criticized for its strong magical and superstitious overtones in this regard. This accounts for the continued popularity of, and interest in, faith and psychic healing, miracles of all kinds, and unexplained phenomena among the great Filipino masses.

On a point deemed more significant to this study, many observers of Latin popular religious behaviour have pointed out that tourists are often struck by the way local devotees give a prominent place to images and statues of saints.<sup>36</sup> The people treat the images as if they were real people. When asked about the matter, any well instructed Catholic (there will be many exceptions, of course), however, will be quick to make the distinction between the image and the saint represented by the image, insisting that the images are mere reminders that put people in touch with the realities, or persons, they represent.<sup>37</sup>

Since saints are viewed as special instruments or vehicles of God's power, many of the Catholic faithful have constant recourse to them,

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<sup>36</sup>Lynch, "Folk Catholicism in the Philippines," 129.

<sup>37</sup>Lynch, "Folk Catholicism in the Philippines," 129.

a gesture manifesting a relationship of trust and confidence (*confianza*). But how else can one establish physical contact with a heavenly saint with whom one shares a relationship of trust? This is done through the image of the saint. More than a display of *confianza* (trust, confidence) in the saint notwithstanding, clothing, holding, kissing, or touching the image is simply an expression of the Filipino's deeply personal approach to Faith, and its many sacred objects and symbols.

Another interesting note is that most images are kept privately in households, and not in churches. Not only does this illustrate the heart-warming familial approach of Filipino faith practice, it also affirms a deeply Catholic belief in the "communion of all saints," both in heaven and on earth.

### **A Reappraisal of Popular Piety**

The official Church attitude toward popular religiosity does appear to be somewhat ambivalent, as earlier noted. The very nature and forms of popular piety are such that Church authority cannot always possibly exercise direct supervision over its manifold expressions. The lines are not always clearly drawn between the genuinely religious and the purely social, between orthodoxy and superstition. The spectrum of this ambivalence ranges from acceptance to outright rejection. A good number of popular devotions, however, carry the seal of official approval.<sup>38</sup> The long history of the Church's attitude toward popular piety can be summed up in these words: "The attitude of the Church to popular religion has varied, in different periods and countries, from a tolerance meant to show receptivity to a weakness that lets itself be overrun as, at the other extreme, a severity that condemns and seeks to purge."<sup>39</sup>

While some rites of popular piety may carry certain superstitious overtones and even religious distortions, PCP II acknowledged the positive aspects of popular religiosity. Encouraging the fervent, albeit critical, use of popular religious practices, the bishops write:

These [popular] religious practices are rich in values. They manifest a thirst for God and enable people to be generous and sacrificing in witnessing to their faith. These practices show a deep awareness of the attributes of God: fatherhood, providence, loving and constant presence.

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<sup>38</sup>Chupungco, *Liturgical Inculturation*, 101.

<sup>39</sup>Jean Evenou, "Processions, Pilgrimages, Popular Religion," in *The Church at Prayer*, vol. 3, trans. Matthew O' Connell, Aime Georges Martimort, gen. ed., Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1988, 256.

They engender attitudes of patience, the sense of the Cross in daily life, detachment, openness to others, devotion.<sup>40</sup>

The worship life of both the Church and the individual faithful would certainly be enriched by a diversity of liturgical expressions. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* acknowledges that the diverse liturgical rites manifest the universality of the Church because they signify and manifest the same mystery of Christ.<sup>41</sup> Sacramentals and blessings certainly make up partially for what the Eucharist and the other sacraments fail to provide, but they do not fulfil with the same amount of intensity the need for a more personal and unstructured prayer, something made available by the rites of popular piety, especially the devotions.<sup>42</sup> Chupungco believes that popular devotions will enhance active liturgical participation since these function both “as a personal preparation for and an overflow of the experience of God during official worship...”<sup>43</sup> Moreover, the reformed liturgy, even in the vernacular, has given rise to the unsettling feeling that it still remains too removed and distant from a good number of people, especially when no attempt is made to inculturate it.<sup>44</sup>

Popular piety may not represent in some respects the Christian ideal in terms of mature witnessing to and celebrating the Faith. However, popular piety may be the only means known or familiar to a great mass of Filipino Catholics for expressing their faith in very concrete, meaningful terms. Popular piety, then, can be an opportunity for clarifying and deepening the faith of today’s Filipino Catholic from a liturgical perspective. It should be said likewise, however, that while popular piety has been a meaningful evocation of faith for so many, it seems to be unable in many respects to respond to the spiritual hunger of so many young Catholics. The attraction and conversion of a great number of Catholic youth to so-called New Age Movements and Born-Again Prayer Groups appear to be on the rise.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>PCP II, no. 172; Cf. Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Pasay City: St Paul Publications, 1975, no. 80.

<sup>41</sup>ECCCE, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994; reprint, Manila: Word and Life Publications, 1994, no. 1208 (Hereafter cited as CCC).

<sup>42</sup>Chupungco, *Liturgical Inculturation*, 98.

<sup>43</sup>Chupungco, *Liturgical Inculturation*, 98.

<sup>44</sup>Chupungco, *Liturgical Inculturation*, 98.

<sup>45</sup>It would seem that Catholic youth who have been schooled are the ones attracted to New Age and Born Again movements, while the unschooled naturally gravitate toward popular piety.

The Gospel has never existed in some “pure,” unalloyed state, totally over and above the specific culture of a particular people in which it roots itself. “Rather,” as the *NCDP* explains:

as with the first Spanish missionaries who introduced the Christian Faith to the inhabitants of these islands, it is always a case of missionaries with a particular cultural understanding and practice of the Christian Faith, evangelizing people who already have their own indigenous religious beliefs and practices.<sup>46</sup>

The process of inculturation is never simply a matter of substituting the new faith for the old one, nor of setting both faiths alongside one another, but involves a complex process of mutual assimilation, integration, and transformation.

The rites of popular piety provide ordinary Filipinos the “language” in which to understand and accept the message of Christ. These rites give their faith a physical form which they recognize as their own, communicating the Gospel in images and symbols that are distinctly theirs.<sup>47</sup>

The sheer variety and popularity of these rites suggest the following measures for more effective liturgical catechesis: 1) to respond to a great felt-need for more *active* and *affective* worship life among many Filipino Catholics, especially the less educated ; 2) to recognize that official Church liturgy is often still much too formal and too predominantly priest-centred; 3) to show the Catholic faithful how to use Scripture and the Church’s liturgy as ground for, and means to purify, their own personal devotions and rituals. The inculturation of Filipino Christian worship is a complex task that requires effort, judicious discernment, and sensitivity to the Spirit’s animating presence in the community of faith.<sup>48</sup>

Indeed, Filipinos have always been known to be a deeply religious and pious people. Notwithstanding their popular religiosity, valuable as this may be, the religious practices of most Filipino Catholics should lead to a deeper sense of community and a heightened awareness of the Risen Christ’s presence as experienced in the Church’s liturgical celebrations. Ongoing liturgical education of the faithful, therefore, should be developed in all parishes so that popular religiosity does not degenerate into distorted and superficial superstitious forms of worship.

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<sup>46</sup>NCDP, no. 35.

<sup>47</sup>Lynch, “Folk Catholicism in the Philippines,” 130.

<sup>48</sup>NCDP, no. 330.

Popular piety is a characteristic of the Filipino Catholic vital to the understanding of the Filipino character. For centuries vocal members of the clergy have lamented the fact that many Filipinos, especially in rural areas where the majority live, go to church only three times in their lives — when they are baptized, when they marry, and when at death they receive the last rites. This is an exaggerated charge because Filipinos also go to church to attend confirmations, Mass at Christmas and fiesta time, and Holy Week services. But it is true not too many bother to go to church outside of these social occasions.<sup>49</sup>

### **Re-imagining Popular Piety**

The Church's "preferential option for the poor" is meaningless "unless it incorporates the values expressed in the popular religion of the poor."<sup>50</sup> While popular piety may, among other things, fall "prey to superstition, magic, fatalism, idolatry, consumerism, political manipulation and an empty ritual devoid of faith,"<sup>51</sup> nonetheless, it "contains an immense reservoir of authentic Christian virtues: charity, patience, sacrifice, dignity, fraternity, justice."<sup>52</sup>

"The Virgin of Guadalupe," for instance, "is a concrete expression of how the Gospel must be preached in Latin America, not in European, white, dominating or colonizing ways, but in ways that express incarnation in a struggling people."<sup>53</sup>

The Philippine EDSA revolution of 1986 showcased the inherent power of popular religiosity to initiate political change. For three days in February thousands prayed the rosary, held up figures of the Child Jesus and Mary, and sang hymns together. What resulted was a dramatic non-violent protest against a corrupt and discredited regime. In Chile, the customary Day of the Dead has become for many a way to protest the many injustices of the Pinochet dictatorship. The centuries-old ritual honouring the dead has always been extended to include vigils for those who have died at the hands of Pinochet's secret police.<sup>54</sup>

Can such virtues as charity, patience, sacrifice, a sense of the cross in daily life, and fortitude go beyond personal consolation, beyond a sense of resignation as well as hope amid life's adversities, go beyond

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<sup>49</sup>Roces and Roces, *Culture Shock*, 70.

<sup>50</sup>McCoy, "Popular Religion in Latin America," 536.

<sup>51</sup>McCoy, "Popular Religion in Latin America," 536.

<sup>52</sup>McCoy, "Popular Religion in Latin America," 536.

<sup>53</sup>McCoy, "Popular Religion in Latin America," 536.

<sup>54</sup> See Gerald Arbuckle, "In Praise of Popular Piety," *The Tablet*, 13 May 1989, 6.

EDSA as a once in a lifetime event, and be harnessed to become instruments of comprehensive social and structural change? Or should popular religion simply engender those qualities that help us deal with the many vicissitudes of life?

Popular piety will always be used by politicians to further their ambitions. *Quiapo*, or the feast of the Black Nazarene, attest to this. But can popular religion simply retreat to its normative role, that is, to beget those virtues that encourage a more private practice of the Faith, of any faith? Or, as when the circumstances call for it, evolve into something that can initiate a more lasting socio-structural transformation.

It is hoped that with the ongoing Filipino liturgical renewal and reform, and a more positive reevaluation of popular piety, a more participatory, genuine, and truly Filipino worship life is gradually realized.