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**THE FILIPINO DEVOTION TO THE SANTO  
NIÑO: FROM FOLK CHRISTIANITY TO  
POST-COLONIAL CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY**

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**Abstract**

The story of the image of the *Santo Niño* in the Philippines serves as the focal point of the story of the Filipino people. This paper maps the evolving image of the *Santo Niño* gleaned from the colonial history of the people. From this colonial experience, the paper weaves in the Filipinos' quest for new identities when they regained their freedom and leave the country to better their economic lives. Here, their identities are renegotiated as immigrants of the United States of America, their former colonizer. All throughout the paper, the question is probed: "How has the image of the *Santo Niño* continually defined and shaped the Filipino way of seeing and knowing Jesus?" The *Santo Niño* grew into a man, crucified. The post-colonial theology that is constructed comes from this image of Jesus who bears the wounds of human injustices but resists the temptation to inflict the same pains on both the oppressors and the oppressed. The history of the people is retold in the *Santo Niño*, the Incarnate God.

**Keywords:** Colonialism, Franciscan Theology of Incarnation, Immigration, Post-colonial Theology, *Santo Niño*

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## 1. The Intersection of Religion and History

This paper is an attempt to retell the story of the image of the *Santo Niño*<sup>1</sup> as it serves as the focal point of our story as a people. It transports us back to our ancient past, roots us in the present, and routes us to our future path.

History is often told from the perspective of the colonizers. In the case of the Philippines, much of what we know from our early history with Spain comes from the accounts of Ferdinand Magellan's chronicler, Antonio Pigafetta and Miguel Lopez de Legazpi's chronicler, Fernando Riquel.<sup>2</sup> This paper, gives me the space to recount the story of the *Santo Niño* by interweaving the legends and narratives of our ancestors with the historical and ethnographic data from the chronicles of the Spanish expeditions in the Philippines.

In doing postcolonial theology, I will try to present the colonial and migration experiences of the Filipino people, and try to draw on the Franciscan wisdom and intellectual tradition in teasing out the theological-anthropological concepts of interrelatedness, interdependence, mutuality, and respect that are captured in the Filipino theological concept of "*pagbabangong dangal*" or the raising up of people's dignity and honour, or becoming a "some-body" in a colonized and racialized body.<sup>3</sup> This paper will especially highlight some of the experiences of Filipino immigrants in the United States of America, as they continue with their own devotion to the *Santo Niño* and how this helps them negotiate their identities as immigrants.

How has the image of the *Santo Niño* continually defined and shaped the Filipino way of seeing and knowing Jesus?

The story of our ancestors' encounter with this God begins with the ambition of Ferdinand Magellan to circumnavigate the world and Spain's royal quest for nutmeg and cloves. In historical terms, the coming of Magellan to the Philippines was one of the unintended consequences of the Turks' closure of the trade route from Egypt to

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<sup>1</sup>The *Santo Niño* or the image of the Child Jesus was brought to the Philippines by Ferdinand Magellan and was given to Queen Juana of Cebu when she was baptized into Catholic faith. The image was believed to have been carved in the Spanish territory of Flanders in Belgium.

<sup>2</sup>See Rosa C.P. Tenazas, *The Santo Niño of Cebu*, Cebu City: University of San Carlos Publications, 1965, 20.

<sup>3</sup>I have adapted the phrase from Gemma Tulud Cruz, a Filipina Theologian and used it as a springboard to construct a postcolonial theology based on the Filipino people's devotion to the *Santo Niño*. See Gemma Tulud Cruz, *Towards an Intercultural Theology of Migration: Pilgrims in the Wilderness*, Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2010, 123.

the East Indies at the close of the fifteenth century.<sup>4</sup> The great powers of that time, Portugal and Spain, scrambled to find alternative routes to the Spice Islands and appealed to Pope Alexander VI to grant them the rights to navigate the uncharted seas.<sup>5</sup> The pope issued two Bulls, demarcating the lines of conquest for Portugal and Spain, and mandating both to Christianize the lands of their conquest. The two countries formalized the agreement in the Treaty of Tordesillas on June 7, 1494. This treaty sets the stage for the voyage of Magellan to the much coveted Moluccas.

These confluence of events along with human ambitions to conquer the world, paved way for the coming of Magellan to the Philippines. The Catholic Church served as the arbiter of these ambitions and the early Filipinos became the unsuspecting subjects in these events. It is worth noting too that there is no native dish in the country that uses nutmeg as a basic ingredient. Yet, because of this commodity, we were caught up in the struggle for power, fame, and wealth. Then there was the Spanish-American War, where the Philippines, Cuba, and Puerto Rico were traded by Spain to the United States to settle their armed conflict. This was formalized in an agreement known as the Treaty of Paris in 1898. Here again, the Philippines was caught between these two warring countries trying to establish their supremacy on the world stage.

I would like to frame the devotion to the image of the *Santo Niño* within these historical contexts to show how the Filipino Catholics appropriated the image to their particular social locations and used it to negotiate their identities as Filipinos; and in this paper, as Filipino immigrants and new Americans in the United States of America. I hope that in this paper, I can also contribute my voice, as a budding Asian theologian, to the conversation on how Christianity evolved in the Philippines and defined the identity of the people who have suffered through colonization and dictatorship. By mapping the evolving image of the image of the *Santo Niño* gleaned from the colonial history of the people, this paper discloses how the *Santo Niño* emerges from being one of the idols to becoming the God of the people, from being a foreign deity to becoming the Lord of the land, and from being an image to an Incarnate God. In their religious experience, the people lend their voices to the proclamation of God's words, "Be still and confess that I am God! I am exulted among the nations, exalted on the earth" (Ps. 46:10).

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<sup>4</sup>Tenazas, *The Santo Niño of Cebu*, 18.

<sup>5</sup>Tenazas, *The Santo Niño of Cebu*, 18.

Using a Christological lens, I would attempt to explicate the postcolonial Christian theology of the Filipinos' enduring devotion to the *Santo Niño* and its contribution to the growth of the Catholic Church in the country as well as to the growing identity of the Filipinos as migrant people in postcolonial times.

## **2. The Devotion to the *Santo Niño*: A Bridge from the Past and a Gateway to the Future**

When we Filipinos leave our country we bring with us our past, our own language(s), worldviews, cultures, beliefs and practices, both religious and secular. For us then, this devotion to the *Santo Niño* is not only a popular religious expression but can be a bridge into our past and, I contend, a gateway into the future here in our adoptive country, the United States. It can offer us new ways of doing theology and new impetus to engage in social justice, peace, economic and environmental issues in our own contexts. For embedded in our ancestors' devotion was their struggle for their own freedom and independence from the colonizers. We can see in this struggle that some, if not most, of our forebears were not passive recipients of their fate. They prayed, acted on their needs, and remained faithful to the *Santo Niño* even if the outcomes of their struggles were not in their favour. This memory can inspire us to act on our own behalf and advocate for our own rights.

However, the devotion to the *Santo Niño* is not often seen favourably, as it is viewed as a manifestation of a fatalistic worldview, where devotees consider their situations as being ordained by supernatural beings or, "*iginuhit ng tadhana*" (designed by heaven; fated; destined).<sup>6</sup> Many Filipino Catholics still negotiate this space between belief in God and fatalism. Indeed, dealing with historic traumas is not easy and it becomes twice as hard to navigate and negotiate this space when we move to places where racism exists overtly and covertly.

Compounding the situation is the role that power plays in negotiating differences and uniqueness within Filipino communities in the Philippines or abroad. For those who have been colonized, the exercise of power is oftentimes problematic. Colonization tends to disempower the colonized. This is one reason why our forebears' dependence on the *Santo Niño* and their expression of *utang na loob* ("debt of gratitude") to this God, are sometimes viewed critically by Filipino intellectual elites and social activists.

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<sup>6</sup>I use the translation by Gemma Tulud Cruz. See *An Intercultural Theology of Migration*, 78.

Rachel Bundang, a Filipino American theologian, observes the tendency of most Filipino immigrants to reduce their devotion into a mere act of surrendering to the divine will without taking any personal responsibility for their lives.<sup>7</sup> Negotiating power and eventually holding its theological significance can help Filipino Americans and new immigrants reclaim or remake identities in the land of our former American colonizers. Historically, we have always experienced an imbalance in power, whether in our own country or in the U.S. After gaining our full independence in 1946, we suffered another setback in 1972, when then Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos declared Martial Law. The Filipino people's freedom was again curtailed under his dictatorship that ended in 1986 in a peaceful popular uprising, dubbed as "people power." Because of these historical experiences, we tend to shy away from exercising our power thus, weakening our capacity to work toward the good, for peace and justice. By not attending to our own power and individual worth, we also diminish our capacity to exercise our agency, particularly moral agency.<sup>8</sup> This is one key area that needs closer examination and attentiveness. Our belief in this God can help us build an inner moral compass that will help us navigate oppressive and unjust situations.

Through the years, we have developed coping mechanisms that tend to undermine the real power that is rooted in our Filipino virtues and values. The devotion to the *Santo Niño* might help us align and model our power in the example of Jesus. In him, what is brought low is lifted, what is humbled is exalted, what is disfigured is re-membered. Knowing how he does this in each of our lives can enable us who were colonized and marginalized not to repeat the kind of injustice and violence that marked our history. We can glean this wisdom too from Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians: "... and God chose the lowly and despised of the world, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who are something, so that no human being might boast before God" (1 Cor 1:28-29). The people chosen and ruled by God are bestowed with the wisdom and power of Christ, the Son who brought righteousness, sanctification, and redemption in this world (cf 1 Cor 1:30).

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<sup>7</sup>Bundang, "May You Storm Heaven with Your Prayers," in Rita Nakashima Brock, et al., ed. *Off the Menu: Asian and Asian North American Women's Religion & Theology*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007, 99-100.

<sup>8</sup>Bundang, "May You Storm Heaven with Your Prayers," 99.

### 3. Power Dynamics in Social/Ecclesiastical Roles and the Creation of Socio-Cultural Spaces

Filipino immigrants in the U.S. and elsewhere in the world tend to congregate in churches, commercial centres and community halls.<sup>9</sup> For most Filipino immigrants, coming to America is considered a blessing thus there is a tendency among Filipino Americans and immigrants to give back to God in gratitude for this blessing received. They express this either by going to church or participating actively in its ministerial life. But then, even if they do not serve in the church, a large number of Filipino immigrants find comfort in it, dubbing the church their “home away from home.” Popular devotions in this sense can help the immigrants find meaning in their lives in America since they connect them to their past. However these religious expressions are not widely shared in the U.S., even among established Filipino American and new immigrant Catholics. These differences create power imbalances especially between the Philippine-born laity and the clergy, and between urban and rural Filipino immigrants.

The Philippine Church and Catholicism still carry some residual practices inherited from Spain, heavily influenced by the Council of Trent. The Philippine-born clergy still occupy a very important role in the Church and whether aware or not, they carry this with them wherever they are assigned. In here lies the tension. The Filipino immigrant laity, for the most part, have been acclimated to a different ecclesial environment in America. Consider the controversy on the devotion to the *Santo Niño* at one of the parishes in the Archdiocese of San Francisco.<sup>10</sup> In 1979, a Filipino American group called the *Santo Niño* de Cebu Association entered into an agreement with the pastor of St Joseph’s Church in San Francisco to build a Marble Altar for the *Santo Niño* as well as to hold an annual fiesta celebration from the date of the image’s enthronement. When a Filipino-born pastor was appointed to head the parish in 1982, he did not honour the agreement between the group and his predecessor. The pastor reportedly said that the annual procession held in the streets of San Francisco to the *Santo Niño* Shrine is “*not American*,” and that the shrine’s placement

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<sup>9</sup>For patterns of movements of Filipino Americans and immigrants within the US, see Rick Bonus, *Locating Filipino Americans*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000, 31-56.

<sup>10</sup>Jeffrey M. Burns, Ellen Skerrett and Joseph M. White, ed. *Keeping Faith: European and Asian Catholic Immigrants*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000, 277-81 (hereafter, Burns).

in the church is not liturgically correct.<sup>11</sup> The leader of the Association on the other hand, tried to circumvent the decision of the new pastor and even disregarded the Archbishop's order to archdiocesan priests not to say outdoor Mass in front of City Hall before the annual *Santo Niño* de Cebu procession to St Joseph's shrine. She asked a Jesuit priest from University of San Francisco (USF) to do it instead, exhibiting her acumen in navigating and interpreting church directives.<sup>12</sup>

Or, consider another incident also in the same archdiocese. A Philippine-born parishioner complained to the Archbishop on the lack of leadership among Filipino clergy to minister the needs of Filipino Americans and immigrants. In her letter she specially expressed her desire to have the Filipino clergy "lead our Filipino people from the external religion and folk Catholicism that many of us, especially those from the provinces, know of, to something more solidly based on faith as our response to God's call."<sup>13</sup> She specifically singled out the devotion to the *Santo Niño* as an example of a "very sentimental devotion" which is incorporated into "beauty contests and fundraising activities."<sup>14</sup> A Filipino pastor was tasked by the Archbishop to respond to this letter. In his response, the pastor acknowledged the points that the parishioner raised but informed her that the Filipino priests in the archdiocese had decided on an approach quite different from what she had proposed. In his own words: "They believe in bringing the Filipinos into the mainstream of American Catholic life, not by emphasizing too much what pertains solely to their culture as a people, but by working on what they have in common with their American fellow-Catholics."<sup>15</sup>

In both these instances, we can see the power struggle that is at play between the laity and the clergy as well as the conflicts between the immigrants who came from the Philippine provinces ("*promdi*" in colloquial terms)<sup>16</sup> and the city-bred or perhaps the highly educated. In anthropological studies in the Philippines, researchers observe that

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<sup>11</sup>Burns, *Keeping Faith: European and Asian Catholic Immigrants*, 278.

<sup>12</sup>Burns, *Keeping Faith: European and Asian Catholic Immigrants*, 279.

<sup>13</sup>Burns, *Keeping Faith: European and Asian Catholic Immigrants*, 273.

<sup>14</sup>Burns, *Keeping Faith: European and Asian Catholic Immigrants*, 273.

<sup>15</sup>Burns, *Keeping Faith: European and Asian Catholic Immigrants*, 273.

<sup>16</sup>*Promdi* is a Filipino slang term for "from the province." One major language in the Philippines and some dialects usually pronounce letter "f" as "p" and vice-versa. This is a derogatory term for people who grew up in the rural areas. The term reveals the divide between the city- and rural-bred Filipinos.

rural Filipinos integrate their faith or religion with their social, cultural, and economic activities while urban Filipinos tend to separate it from their non-religious activities.<sup>17</sup> Urban Filipinos tend to relegate religion as a mere form of worship. This finding is very interesting since in the Philippines, Catholic churches are located in major cities and town centres. My assumption is that the tension that arises between established Filipino Americans and new immigrants in the U.S. may have sprung from these two disparate urban-rural religious worldviews and practices. Also, those coming from the urban areas would have been more exposed to the Church teachings that are very Western-based, than those coming from the rural areas who tend to modify and customize Catholicism according to their “culturally defined ways of doing things.”<sup>18</sup>

In the U.S., it is also interesting to note that where the devotion to the *Santo Niño* flourishes, it is often incorporated into community-created socio-cultural spaces, such as “beauty pageants and fundraisers.” In an ethnographic study done by Rick Bonus among Filipino Americans and immigrants in San Diego and Los Angeles, California, he noted that beauty pageants provide venues where people can generate funds for organizational projects as well as platforms to express political agendas.<sup>19</sup> In a certain sense, beauty pageants are considered by some Filipinos as “sites of weightier issues than those in which women vie for such titles as Miss California, Miss Universe, and Miss International.”<sup>20</sup> These are created social spaces that allow people to negotiate and articulate their identities as Filipino Americans. Here, the Filipinos comfortably negotiate being Americans the Filipino way, by first holding events that are most familiar to them but conducting them in English or *Taglish* (a way of speaking by mixing Tagalog terms with English). Because of the early experiences of the first wave of Filipino immigrants from being excluded in the American public space especially during the 1930s and the different forms of racism that the early immigrants had experienced,<sup>21</sup> the succeeding groups of Filipino immigrants tend to congregate among themselves as a way

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<sup>17</sup>Jocano, *Folk Christianity: A Preliminary Study of Conversion and Patterning of Christian Experience in the Philippines*, Quezon City: Trinity College, 1981, 22-3.

<sup>18</sup>Jocano, *Folk Christianity*, 20.

<sup>19</sup>Rick Bonus, *Locating Filipino Americans*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000, 116.

<sup>20</sup>Bonus, *Locating Filipino Americans*, 116.

<sup>21</sup>Bonus, *Locating Filipino Americans*, 31.



to gain confidence and assurance from their compatriots on how to act and behave in their new environment. These spaces serve as social incubators for newcomers as they go through the process of learning new ways of becoming in a country that is familiar but also very foreign. In these socio-cultural spaces, people feel safe and free to be their own selves. Bonus shares what one of his interviewees expressed: “No need to translate. No need to be extra careful because some other person might be offended. No need to pretend I’m this or that.”<sup>22</sup> The people’s need to be their authentic selves is expressed in doing things that are familiar to them, so they can eventually stake a claim and gain foothold in their adoptive country.

In the U.S., the devotion to the *Santo Niño* provides Filipino Catholics a reason to congregate in their own socio-cultural spaces. But as illustrated in the two cases mentioned in the previous section, the task of integration becomes doubly difficult when people belonging to the same ethnic group have to deal with their own differences regarding what it means to be hyphenated Americans. Among the Filipino American Catholics, some members seem impatient with their other fellows who are perceived to be more Filipinos than Americans, revealing, in Bonus’s terms, “the unequal terrain of both Filipinoness and Americanness.”<sup>23</sup> Particularly for the first generation immigrants, negotiating this terrain seems to take a lifetime because they cannot simply shed their identities that have been formed initially in their country of origin. Again, this is where the devotion to the *Santo Niño* becomes important as it can allow the first generation immigrants to put on an identity that goes beyond the racial and ethnic markers of being Filipinos and Americans. To “put on Christ” is a mantle that is both universal and particular.

#### **4. Intergenerational Divide**

Another level of difficulty that confronts the Filipino Americans in negotiating their identity is the difference between the first generation Filipinos and the 1.5 and second generations. Those who belong to the first generation are the Filipino immigrants who have settled down in the United States in their young or adult lives, while the second generations are American-born or the 1.5 generation, whose worldviews have been shaped by their experiences of growing up and living in the United States. Both generations bring the richness and

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<sup>22</sup>Bonus, *Locating Filipino Americans*, 9.

<sup>23</sup>Bonus, *Locating Filipino Americans*, 181.

nuances of their experiences and provide different lenses with which to view the intersection of religion, ethnicity, culture and identity.

The 1.5 and the second generations oftentimes find it difficult to navigate the religious and ethnic traditions of their first generation elders. Both Western worldviews and the popular religious expressions of their compatriots come under critical scrutiny. The latter generation attempts to fashion their own way of worshipping or even doing theology in their communities that have established ways of thinking, doing things and organizing relationships and power. They do not shy away from critiquing their own cultural traditions but at the same time, they do not totally dismiss the significance of popular devotions or religious practices of their own people.

Rachel Bundang has observed the phenomenon among Filipino American Catholics forming home-based prayer circles, or other devotion-based community activities, where the statues of the *Santo Niño*, the Virgin Mary or the Black Nazarene are brought from one house to the other in the neighbourhood.<sup>24</sup> The statue of the *Santo Niño* is the most popular one; schedules to host its novena are usually filled up over a year in advance with many families signing up as repeat hosts.<sup>25</sup> As a theologian and someone belonging to the 1.5 generation, Bundang tries to tread carefully between critique and affirmation, recognizing that devotion to the Holy Child and other forms of traditional worship have helped her parents and their community find meaning in their lives. As a Filipino American theologian, she weaves her own insights and perspectives on these popular devotions, creating her own proposal to rechannel the power of popular devotions into a theology that can bring out God's mercy, justice, liberating love and life-giving actions. Here, she tries to be in dialogue with her elders, listening and learning from their experiences, at the same time teaching and imparting to them what she has unearthed from living in two worlds: the past and the present; her life here in the United States and her early remembrance of the Philippines as a child. She does these while she herself tries to find her own space of expressing and articulating her faith in ways that may be different from her elders' but hold meaning for her.

In all the experiences just explored, we see how the Filipino Americans and new immigrants carve differing spaces of belonging, as both citizens and Catholics, using their traditional devotions and

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<sup>24</sup>Bundang, "May You Storm Heaven with Your Prayers," 99.

<sup>25</sup>Bundang, "May You Storm Heaven with Your Prayers," 91.

religion as a springboard for redefining, reclaiming or remaking their own identities in Christ.

### 5. The Devotion to the *Santo Niño*: The Filipino Way of (Re)claiming Identity

Filipinos in the United States “engage in defining themselves against those [who] seek to render them invisible, and in transforming themselves in a place that continues to exclude them and treat them as marginal.”<sup>26</sup> This observation by Bonus seems to echo what our forebears did when they were first colonized by Spain. Their devotion to the *Santo Niño* became both a vehicle and a space where they negotiated the reversal of their status from being owners of their lands to being reduced as subjects of Spain. The image of the *Santo Niño* bestowed on them their identity as a people of this God, surpassing the identity conferred upon them by the *conquistadores*. They themselves articulated it in their novena prayer: the Holy Child Jesus chose to rule them. Hence they are His people and He their God. The devotion thus to the image was not simply an expression of people’s piety, but an assertion of their identity as the one ruled and chosen by this God. The image became a symbol that satisfied the people’s basic needs because this God provided rain in time of drought, health in time of sickness, food in time of want, and protection in time of danger.<sup>27</sup> God became visible to the people not only because of the image of the *Santo Niño* but also because of what this God has provided them: rain, food, health, and shelter. Because of these, God became more apparent to the people and the people became more aware of their reality with this God, they asked and they received. They are seen by this God. And their experience flowed through the succeeding generations both in the Philippines and elsewhere.

In the U.S., a country that recognizes the separation of church and state, the local government of San Francisco affirms the important role that this religious devotion plays on the life of the Filipino Americans. In an official proclamation in 1978, the Filipino Americans are given the space to profess and celebrate it publicly and openly together with the other San Franciscans. In this public square, both the Filipino Americans and the image of the *Santo Niño* become visible.

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<sup>26</sup>Bundang, “May You Storm Heaven with Your Prayers,” 180.

<sup>27</sup>Tenazas, *The Santo Nino of Cebu*, 91.

## 6. Being New Americans: A View from Postcolonial Theology

The devotion to the *Santo Niño* was instrumental in the formation of our ancestors' identity. Our forebears saw themselves as a people of God. They considered the *Santo Niño* as their ruler. But as with all things foreign, the early Filipino Catholics indigenized Catholicism and the devotion to the Holy Child Jesus, turned them into folk forms, and embedded them into the Philippine way of life and worldview.

We need to retrieve the theology that undergirds the relationship of the Filipino people with the *Santo Niño*. What does this image signify to the people? One Filipino devotee, a cab driver explains that if he displays the image in his car it reminds him and his passengers that there is "holiness and dignity in doing one's job even if it is just a simple one."<sup>28</sup> The driver's identification with the image allows him to see the sacred in his daily work. Filipino theologians, like Fr Leonardo Mercado, SVD, see the growing relationship of the people to the image as an expression of their understanding of the incarnation.<sup>29</sup> They see Christ as an intimate friend, or a God who is in fellowship with them. This concept is captured in the Tagalog term *pakikisama* or "being with."<sup>30</sup> This is how most devotees see the image when it is dressed in simple garments like themselves. The *Santo Niño* knows how to be with the people (*makisama*) despite His powerful (*maykapal*) status.<sup>31</sup> The stories about this image handed down from generation to generation point to this enduring quality of the *Santo Niño*: he acts just like one of them, he pulls pranks, hugs people, buys produce from local vendors and hates being left in the water.<sup>32</sup>

How do we move forward with this devotion in this postcolonial time? I will attempt to begin the step by situating postcolonial thought within Robert Young's description of postcolonial thought as a knowledge that comes from the worldviews and experiences of the people who have been dispossessed of their own lands, devalued, and denied their cultural heritage.<sup>33</sup> Although colonized people now often

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<sup>28</sup>See Julius Bautista, *Figuring Catholicism: An Ethnohistory of the Santo Niño de Cebu*, Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2010, 43-4.

<sup>29</sup>Bautista, *Figuring Catholicism*, 43-44.

<sup>30</sup>Bautista, *Figuring Catholicism*, 43-44.

<sup>31</sup>Bautista, *Figuring Catholicism*, 43-44.

<sup>32</sup>Tenazas, *The Santo Nino of Cebu*, 54-78.

<sup>33</sup>Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction*, UK and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, 4.

run their own countries, they still have to struggle for parity and equality in an economic global system that is dominated by the West.

Yet postcolonialism goes beyond the struggle for material wealth and economic growth. In Young's own words, "it asserts not just the right of African, Asian, and Latin American people to access resources and material well-being, but also [upholds] the dynamic power of their cultures, cultures that are now intervening in and transforming the societies of the west."<sup>34</sup> Migration is an offshoot of colonialism; people move to countries of their former colonizers, like Filipinos migrating to the United States. In migration, identities are invariably transformed, cultures and religions are necessarily refashioned making them sources of empowerment and sites for the reconstruction of meanings.<sup>35</sup>

The image of the *Santo Niño* is the Filipino people's first encounter with the reality of the Christian God. How has the image of the *Santo Niño* continually defined and shaped the Filipino American way of seeing and knowing Christ? How can this image help give birth to a theology that incorporates the Filipino people's cultural encounters and historical experiences of colonization and immigration?

I would like to engage these questions by exploring the theological concept of *pagbabangong-dangal*, which literally means "the lifting up or raising up of one's dignity and honor."<sup>36</sup> With *pagbabangong-dangal*, oppressive situations and dehumanizing conditions are overcome and transformed. This is exhibited and experienced "whenever a person's dignity and honor are restored, vindicated, uplifted... [and] whenever people are willing to stand up, like Jesus, for the common humanity that they share with the others."<sup>37</sup> *Pagbabangong-dangal* as a theological concept can help sustain the belief of the people, retain their identity in Jesus, and at the same time make this relationship with Jesus visible in this world.

### 7. "***Pagbabangong-dangal: America is in the Heart***"<sup>38</sup>

The concept of *pagbabangong-dangal* is captured in *America is in the Heart*, an autobiographical novel by Carlos Bulosan who gives voice to one of the earliest immigration experiences of the Filipinos in

<sup>34</sup>Young, *Postcolonialism*, 4.

<sup>35</sup>Cruz, *An Intercultural Theology of Migration*, 121.

<sup>36</sup>Cruz, *An Intercultural Theology of Migration*, 276.

<sup>37</sup>Jose de Mesa, *Why Theology is Never Far Away From Home* (2003, 166) cited by Cruz, *An Intercultural Theology of Migration*, 277.

<sup>38</sup>Carlos Bulosan, *America is in the Heart*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973.

America in the 1930s and 1940s. This novel discloses the plight of Filipino immigrants in the United States and unveils the immigrants' deepest desire to be accepted and belong in a country that is wrestling against its own demons of racism. In this autobiographical novel, Bulosan bares his struggles, longings, angst, frustrations, despair, loves and hopes for his own self and people in America. He fights for the rights of the oppressed, especially for his friends and those who are closest to him: his brothers Macario and Amado.

*America is in the Heart*, speaks of one of the deepest desires and needs of human persons: to belong and be free. Bulosan, shared with us not only his story but likewise the spark that kept him going amid great suffering and despair. This spark is captured in Bulosan's desire to fight against any forms of injustice committed against the people of colour. Bulosan writes, "I only want to expose what terror and ugliness I have seen, what shame and honor I have experienced, so that in my work, however limited in scope and penetration, others will find a reason for a deeper grievance against social injustice and a higher dream of human perfection."<sup>39</sup>

Bulosan as a Filipino American novelist and artist did not just write. He advocated and fought for the workers' rights in the United States. In his active involvement with the unions, particularly the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU), he was able to help transform exploitative structures "and uncover the wellspring of freedom, beauty, and goodness in the self-renewing creativity of labor."<sup>40</sup> He drew his inspiration from his active participation in the worker's movement. He believed in the fundamental dignity of the human person and summoned the people of colour and those others who fight for their freedom, to resist any forms of injustice that stifle human creativity and dignity. Bulosan showed the succeeding generations of Filipino Americans how to advocate for their own and other people's rights and dignity as a people. He exhorted his contemporaries and the future generations to work in solidarity with other people.

To be in solidarity with other people, carries theological weight. To love or to be in solidarity with the others is an ethical stance. This is a moral act that springs in response to Jesus' invitation to love as contained in the sacred Scriptures that we read and reflect upon as Catholics. This call for solidarity is also the challenge that Bundang

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<sup>39</sup>Epifanio San Juan, *From Exile to Diaspora*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998 106.

<sup>40</sup>San Juan, *From Exile to Diaspora*, 131.

poses to most devout Filipino American Catholics who tend to leave everything to God. She challenges them to be proactive and exercise their own moral agency.<sup>41</sup> As Jesus himself said, we are no longer slaves. Our devotion to the *Santo Niño*, therefore, ought to empower and strengthen our capacity to exercise our freedom and moral agency to carry out the mission that Jesus has handed down to us from generation to generation, through the teachings of the Church, our shared Tradition, collective religious experiences in our belief in Jesus and the experiences of our forebears as written in the sacred Scriptures.

### **8. Living in Christ: A Pathway to Being New Americans**

Throughout history, we have witnessed what it is like to live in the world that continues to devalue human lives. For those who believe in Christ, regardless how bent and misshapen the human person has been throughout history, the image of Jesus always comes before us, in the image of the crucifix or in the *Santo Niño*. Jesus experienced the vulnerabilities of our bodies because he became like one of us. We all have wounds and other forms of brokenness that we carry with us. We have to recognize and name them so we may not inflict more wounds on the already broken world. As our ancestors have shown us, we are all interdependent and interrelated. The conquerors and the conquered, the rulers and the ruled, the powerful and the powerless, worshipped the *Santo Niño*.

*Pagbabangong dangal* is to reclaim what is inherently Filipino so we can integrate it with our being new Americans, for what connects us with one another is our basic humanity, the same thing that we share with Jesus. *Pagbabangong-dangal* in this sense, involves the recognition of the intrinsic worth of the other. This takes place when we relate in the same public space, not only in the economic marketplace where human value is measured in productivity and monetary terms.

For Filipino American Catholics, the Church is one of the public spaces where we can share our basic identity with the others. The Church carries our shared history as a people who believe in the Christian God. This space is not perfect, but it holds within it our foundational belief in the incarnate reality of the Christian God. It is here that we share the Eucharistic meal, God's new way of becoming visible in this world. The *Santo Niño* grew into a man, crucified, was

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<sup>41</sup>Bundang, "May You Storm Heaven with Your Prayers," 99.

buried, and in the Catholic Christian belief, was risen. The risen Christ becomes the Bread of Life. This God, as devotees would attest, knows how to be with the people (*makisama*) and be in solidarity with them. This Bread of Life is celebrated in the liturgy of the Eucharist, once again exhibiting that God knows how to be with the people (*makisama*) despite His powerful (*maykapal*) status.<sup>42</sup> Through the devotion to the *Santo Niño*, we Filipino Catholics recognize God's humble presence and our own worth as human persons with this God. From this recognition, we become aware that when we eat the bread, we become "some-body," we imbibe the image of the *Santo Niño*, the Christ incarnate. We praise and acknowledge the offering of Christ himself, the ultimate source of our lives. This is *utang na loob* or debt of gratitude in its pure essence. We become "some-body" because we believe that in the Eucharist we make visible the presence of our Christian God as we embody and carry the love and be in solidarity (*makisama, maki-isa*) with the others. *Pagbabangong dangal* is becoming "some-body" in our own (s)kin. To become "some-body" is also to delight in our own aspirations and ambitions to become like the *Santo Niño*, the Child of God. *Hala bira!*<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>Bundang, "May You Storm Heaven with Your Prayers," 99.

<sup>43</sup>This is the chant we sing when we celebrate *Dinagyang* festival in honour of the *Santo Niño* in Iloilo City, where I grew up. The phrase roughly means "give it all you've got." *Dinagyang* means "merry-making."