

## **Priesthood, Its Spirituality**

### **The Philippine Experience**

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#### **Introduction**

In the Philippines' cultural milieu and context, the influences of the ordained ministers shaped and fashioned the church and its impact on society. Filipino priests propel the local church into a new evangelizing thrust and direction. They are always challenged to be attuned to the ebb and flow of the life and situation of the people and to be responsive to the signs of the times. They are in one way or another part of the structures and/or elements that helped make or break the culture, history and destiny of the people seeking and searching for their definitive destiny and future.

Down the stream of our history, priesthood in the Philippines evolved into a very relevant ministry and responsibility in the church. Looking back, in the Spanish era, priesthood had always been related if not out rightly identified with power and influences that the colonizers represent. Priests-religious symbolizes oppression and degradation. They are not the representative of peace and freedom which were supposedly be the mark of Christianity.

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Despite this painful past however, in those times, new form of priesthood emerged. The native clergies had asserted themselves in order to establish their rights and identity as against the Spanish-priests colonizers. They fought for freedom; they suffered, were persecuted and died in the hands of the powers that be. They symbolize hope for freedom and liberation.

The gains of the local clergies showed its great mark in our history for in our story as a nation, the growth of the local church which is Filipino comes to the fore with the birth of many parishes and dioceses and with the continuing increase of local vocations to the priesthood and religious life.

In the 60's and the 70's, when the Universal Church reckons with change, the local church also goes with the trend of change. Our local church emerges as a community of God that caters to the needs and ministerial demands of the people. With this given changes the notion of priesthood in the Philippines also evolves and progresses. Two streams however could be gleaned from this changes.

Firstly, the Filipino priesthood remains to be within the very frame of the hierarchical church. Priests were placed in the pedestal for it remains to be a status and a position of influence and power in the specter of the Philippine cultural milieu. Priests were regarded not simply as moral figures and authorities, they also possessed huge political influence as seen in the likes of the much renowned Jamie Cardinal Sin, the late Archbishop of Metropolitan Manila. Up to this date, the church maintains its strong clout and influences politically, and so are the priests.

Secondly, a great part of the Filipino clergy, having been influenced by the atmosphere of change brought about by Vatican II and also conditioned by the harsh realities that confronts the Filipino people, embraces the less traveled road of accompanying the people especially the poor in their quest and struggle for human freedom and liberation.

Obviously, the rise of liberation theology greatly influenced the progressive and the more politically involved sector of the Filipino clergy. Many involved themselves in organizing Basic Christian Communities or the Basic Ecclesial Communities. Some have joined in the formation of farmers and labor groups. A good number even went to the extremes of joining mass movements that struggles against the previous dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos. Up to this present times, many priests are very much involved still with organizing BCC's/BEC's and sectoral groups.

## 1. Identity of the Filipino Priest

From the streams above it is very clear that our history and context as a nation and as a people serve as impetus to the notion and understanding that in the Philippine experience, priesthood is instituted within the people of God for the sake of the people of God. Priesthood is dedicated to promoting the interests of the people, of the brethren.<sup>1</sup> Filipino priests arise and are born out of the people and by the people. It is the concern for the people that is central and essential to the evolution and development of the identity and heart of the Filipino priesthood and its spirituality.

The identity of Filipino priests and their ministries cannot be understood apart from the community setting. Priests are ordained for the community.<sup>2</sup> As part and integral to the life of the community, priests are servants-leaders who have the responsibility of building the Christian community. They must live where the people are. They have to take as their very own the struggles, anguish and pains, as well as the joys and hopes, dreams and aspirations of the people whom they must **serve** with an undivided love.

Aside from being the servant-leaders, priests have to preach the word and wisdom that comes from the gospel. They are tasked to **evangelize** people so that the people themselves may have not only life or may be built up into a community of believers, but in order that they may in turn become witnesses to the Word they have believed, that people shall have truly grown in their faith when they emerge as announcers of the Word. Through the servant-leadership of the preaching priests, the people are inspired and formed to become an evangelizing and prophetic community.<sup>3</sup>

Filipino priests also possess an identity as spiritual animators of the believing community. As spiritual animators they are called always to be fully aware of their inherent roles as spiritual leaders. They have to be conscious that they are responsible for ensuring that the people entrusted to them have harmonious and deep relationship with the Divine.

To foster such priestly identity, priests have to admit their personal weaknesses, reflect on their experiences and continually re-discover their calling by the Lord. Their responsibility for spiritual

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<sup>1</sup> See *Lumen Gentium*, Chapter 111

<sup>2</sup> See *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> See Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines, 175-180.

revitalization and work of animation is a service to the community and a challenging way to respond to the call of God. As animators, they have to lead, and its direction is towards wholeness of life. Their animation is an empowerment for influencing, reflecting and guiding people towards their spiritual way, ways of action and ways of renewing their commitment and tradition

Animation work as part of Filipino priestly identity is in fact an imitation of Jesus who guides people how to see, to feel, how to confront oneself and the outside realities, and teaches the person how to go beyond enmity into becoming whole again and be reconciled back to their selves and to others that hopefully will radiate to the entire spectrum of the society of which the priest served and lived.

Priests as animators have to lead the people back to the centrality of community. Priests in the midst of the community bring Jesus with them as the core of the life of the community. The celebration of the Eucharist in the midst of the people always is the heart of the priests' lives and identity. With this, they carry on their mission of healing and forgiving, of bringing peace and hope, of touching peoples lives.

Their identity is sustained by their continuing effort of forming themselves as men who are supposed to be humble and meek. They have to face and live up to the continuing challenge of living chaste and poor lives in the midst of the people. Priests are to sustain their holy lives with their effort of always living in the very presence of God day and night and able to always change their lives for the betterment of their mission and responsibilities of establishing even now the kingdom that they preached with their examples and with their words. More importantly, they have to be aware and conscious always of their own God-experience and Union with Him. To say, they have to always nurture and nourish their priestly spirituality.

## **2. Priestly Spirituality**

Having understood fully well the integral identity of the Filipino clergy, it is apparent that their spirituality comes to the fore. The spirituality of the Filipino priests emanate from their own encounter and union with Christ which basically strengthens their faith and leads them to transformation. In hindsight, we look at spirituality as a Divine-human relational process. It touches the core of human existence and its relationship with God or with the Absolute. Such a relationship is considered from the viewpoint of transformation.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> K. Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*, Leuven: Peeters, 2002, 1-7.

Spirituality is conceived as a polar structure, which pertains to the relation of the human person to a transcendent dimension and is a dynamic process that is fostered by specific means. It points to our relation to the Absolute.<sup>5</sup>

The articulation of this encounter or dialogue is thus lived out or reaches its fruition in one's lifestyle or lived experience.<sup>6</sup> Spirituality is purely and simply the question of a correspondence with God's revelation in real history, in which God continues to manifest Himself.<sup>7</sup> Spirituality is a relational process that transpires as God reveals Himself with humans in the realm of history, hence their relationship commences.

These claim on spirituality is the heart of the matter of the priestly lives and experiences of the Filipino clergy. It speaks of the priests' described identity and it is vulnerable and always in danger of being torn and broken apart by that which surrounds it. For this, they struggled day by day to live up to the demands of being holy and of constantly being in the very presence of God of which priests ought not just to represent but to carry on as the very presence of God whom they are united with. Priestly lives in the heart of the Filipino community are of constant struggle to obtain union with God. People looked up to priests as the representative if not the very face and presence of God, hence they are accorded so much respect and reverence. However, true indeed to its struggles, many have gone astray and have given in to the trends of consumerism and materialism. Many forgot as well the core of their calling which is to serve and not to be served...

Because of these it is paramount to say that priests are called to be transformed in conformity with Christ. Transformation in conformity is aimed at the recovery of the original form of man, the image of God. To that end, it orients itself to a form which makes present the original figure; in this particular case, Christ in

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<sup>5</sup> Waaijman simply refers to the inner dimension, spirit, and spiritual core, deepest center of the person in its relation with the ultimate mystery or the ultimate goal. This is discovered in the person's spiritual journey or spiritual ascent through one's expression of prayer, in spiritual direction, by the help of maps and methods. See K. Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*, 4.

<sup>6</sup> For further reading see K. Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*, 425.

<sup>7</sup> J. Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness*, New York: Orbis Books, 1988, 93. It must be noted that Sobrino is one of the disciples of Rahner and later affirms that there are commonalities in Rahner's spirituality and liberation theology. However, most of Sobrino's insights are much influenced by the historical context of Latin America.

Christianity. By interiorizing Christ's life, the original image rises to the surface and a person achieves union with God. Confirmation refers to a process in which a person appropriates for himself a selected model of transformation in behavior, thinking and willing, remembering, feeling and focus. This indicates that Christians have to conform themselves to Christ.<sup>8</sup>

Applying the above notions to the Filipino clergy it demands that they are all expected to speak and act in the very name of Christ. Their transformation in conformity manifest that the Filipino clergy must be immersed in the life, wisdom and values of Christ.<sup>9</sup> Priests have to be in constant struggle to purify their intentions, their desires and their commitments and have to resolve fully within themselves that as priests, they have to struggle to live righteous, pious and simple lives that will reflect the very essence and person of Christ; the One whom they embraced to conform their lives into.

### **3. Filipino Priests as Prophets: Fostering their Prophetic Role and Spirituality**

Reflecting on the spirituality of the Filipino clergy it is very evident that a dominant element of spirituality is at work in their lives, and that is the so-called prophetic spirituality and the option for the poor. I claim for this because I believe that in our history and experiences the Filipino clergy underwent the tedious demands of criticizing social practice showing preference for the rich and the tendency of despising the poor, hence prophetic. For this Filipino priests, or at least the progressive section of it calls always for an uncompromising action for Christians to undertake, and that is the preferential option for the poor.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, prophets refer to persons who can speak for God and interpret His will to humans. They call attention to overlooked or suppressed values. They proclaim what should be done; in accord with what the Divinity dictates. A prophet is a person who speaks in a name; the person who consoles; the person who challenges and proclaims.<sup>10</sup> A prophet announces and denounces.<sup>11</sup> A prophet warns the people of the message of Yahweh.

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<sup>8</sup> K. Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*, 463-469.

<sup>9</sup> See Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines, 182 ff.

<sup>10</sup> P. Casaldaliga and J. Vigil, *The Spirituality of Liberation*, London: Burns & Oates, 1994, 124ff.

<sup>11</sup> See Sobrino's exposition on the role of the prophet and the message they preach. J. Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness*, 109.

This is precisely the experience, down the line of our history of the Filipino clergy. This is as well the challenges that they have to face and should not forget, to comfort the afflicted by predicting, in effect, promising the fall of their enemies and oppressors, and thus challenges the established order. Such criticism reflects what Waaijman calls counter spirituality. It is a form that cannot be captured within the cultural and religious consensus. This spirituality attacks the established order; their response upsets its dominance, their resistance breaks its power.<sup>12</sup> Prophetic spirituality can be construed as a counter spirituality because it is imbued with a burning concern for social justice and the improvement of flawed social institutions, of which a good sector of the Filipino clergy lived then and now.

Prophetic spirituality of Filipino priests leads Christians to awareness that they possess a unique human dignity and this transpires when Christians connect with the inner reality of the despised poor and of the real world of which they are a part. It occurs when people relate as equals, as individuals or as a collective, **when** people believe they deserve better and are able to bring about change which is the goal of the Filipino church and its clergy in its effort of establishing the various Basic Ecclesial Communities. Priests' prophetic spirituality brings men and women face to face with a question they must answer with a profound act of honesty. The question posed by the reality of the poor is a reality that calls on men and women not only to recognize and acknowledge it but to take a primary, basic position against it. This is the stage of prophetic denunciation, a call for Christian conversion of which the Filipino clergy succinctly calls Christians to do.<sup>13</sup>

The Philippine situation, then and now, calls for a clear prophetic response and it is the responsibility of the Filipino clergy to make sure that the dynamic relationship between God and the poor is put to the fore by pointing out that God does not condone injustices and the absence of peace which are the elements of the reign of God's kingdom. The prophetic nature of Filipino priests' spirituality demands a vivid human response; to take a preferential option for the poor. Doing this means that the priests are imitating God who made the first move of loving the poor, the Father-Mother of compassion.<sup>14</sup> This is genuine spirituality because concrete moments of transformation on the side of the human pole in the Divine-human encounter occurs, a transformation that is seen in

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<sup>12</sup> K. Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*, 212-301.

<sup>13</sup> J. Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness*, 31.

<sup>14</sup> P. Casaldaliga and J. Vigil, *The Spirituality of Liberation*, 139ff.

the priests' love for the poor. It is a spiritual experience that is centered on the radically transformative encounter with Jesus in and with the poor.<sup>15</sup>

By peering through the faces of the poor, Filipino priests hoped that new possibilities of liberation will be brought to the fore. By merely looking more closely at their condition, new perspectives are expected to be born more specifically on finding ways and measures of uplifting them. The poor become teachers on priestly ways to a more authentic Christian life and spirituality provided; their eyes open enough to discover God's will in and through the people.<sup>16</sup>

Gleaning from our thoughts and reflections above we can say that the Filipino clergy, including its identity and spirituality, evolves in time and in context. They are always challenged by the realities of life that surrounds them. They are always called to respond appropriately when context demands that they have to live out to the true and real nature of their calling... to be like Jesus who opted to be poor and lived in the midst of the suffering people.

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<sup>15</sup> J. Ashley, *Interruptions: Mysticism, Politics and Theology in the Work of Johann Baptist Metz*, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998, 200.

<sup>16</sup> G. Gutierrez, *We Drink From Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People*, London: SCM Press, 2005, 44-47.