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## THE SOCIAL AND MORAL DEMANDS OF THE DEAD CHRIST

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### Abstract

One of the many ways how Asian Christians grow in their knowledge and love for Jesus is through the different images of Jesus that they use in their worship or devotions. The Divine Mercy and the Sacred Heart are examples of the common images and devotions to Jesus that are present in Asia. In the Philippines, while the most popular images and devotions to Jesus are the *Sto. Niño*, the *Hesus Nazareno* and the *Sacred Heart of Jesus*,<sup>1</sup> the image and the devotion to the dead Jesus, which is commonly called as the *Sto. Entierro*, similarly attracts a significant number of devotees (CFC, 553). This image of Jesus is also present and is used in other Asian countries during Lent for the Good Friday religious traditions. While the image and the devotion to the dead Jesus is recognized as a helpful means to draw the believers closer to Jesus, this devotion also encounters the common problem that in many instances, devotions do not inspire or proceed to social action. In this paper, I argue that the image of the dead Jesus has the power to give a deep meaning to the Christian faith that will draw believers profoundly not only to Christ but also to others especially to those who are victims of the present economic-political-socio-cultural problems manifested as poverty and injustice that are happening in many Asian societies today.

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<sup>1</sup>Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines. *Catechism for Filipino Catholics*, Manila: Episcopal Commission on Catechesis and Catholic Education, Word and Life Publications, 2005, par. 467-468. Hereafter referred to as CFC with paragraph number.

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## Introduction

One of the ways that Asian Christians grow in their knowledge and love for Jesus is through the different images of Jesus that they use in their worship or devotions. The Divine Mercy and the Sacred Heart are examples of the common images and devotions to Jesus that are present in Asia. Asian Images of Jesus such as the Avatar, *Satyagrahi* and the *Bodhisattva* are also found in Asian lands.<sup>2</sup> In the Philippines, while the most popular images and devotions to Jesus are the *Sto. Niño*, the *Hesus Nazareno* and the *Sacred Heart of Jesus* (CFC, 467-468), the *Catechism for Filipino Catholics* recognizes that the image and the devotion to the dead Jesus, which is commonly called as the *Sto. Entierro*, similarly attracts a significant number of devotees (CFC, 553).

The people's devotion to the dead Jesus is evident in the yearly memorial of Christ's Paschal Mystery. Devotees usually do lavish preparations and rituals for the dead Christ during the Good Friday celebration which is a popular feast in the Philippines besides Christmas.<sup>3</sup> The devotion to the dead Christ can also be seen through the large numbers of people who come to different shrines and churches built for the dead Christ. Believers, even from far places, flock to these churches to do their devotional practices.<sup>4</sup> In the Philippines, there is a shrine built in Bicol where the dead Christ is called as *Amang Hinulid* (Father laid to rest). Another shrine for the image of the dead Christ can be seen in Pampanga where the dead Christ is called as *Apung Mamacalulu* (Merciful Lord). In Laguna, another shrine for the dead Christ can also be found and devotees call their image of the dead Christ as *Lolo Uweng* (from *Emmanuel Salvador del Mundo*, Jesus Saviour of the world).

The devotion to the dead Jesus is seen by many Filipino Christians as an important element that can foster their knowledge and relationship with Christ. In an interview, a devotee of the *Apung*

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<sup>2</sup>Images of Jesus among other Asian believers, see Michael Amaladoss, *The Asian Jesus*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2006, 21-27.

<sup>3</sup>Benigno P. Beltran, *The Christology of the Inarticulate: An Inquiry into the Filipino Understanding of Jesus the Christ*, Manila: Divine Word Publications, 1987, 138.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/173623/thousands-flock-to-%E2%80%98lolo-uweng%E2%80%99-for-healing-jobs>, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/380989/image-of-dead-christ-draws-thousands>, <http://www.knowangeles.ph/2016/06/apung-mamacalulu-or-apo-shrine.html>, accessed August 16, 2017.

*Mamacalulu* in Pampanga said, “*Lalong umuusbong ang pagkakilala {ko} kay Jesus at tumibay ang pananalig sa kanya.*” (My knowledge of Jesus develops much more and my faith to him becomes stronger).<sup>5</sup> However, while the people’s devotion to the dead Christ develops in them a closer intimacy with Christ and his suffering and death, and provides them resilience in facing their own difficulties and challenges in life,<sup>6</sup> the people’s devotion to the dead Christ seems to not bring them yet to a faith that fosters a deeper relationship with the larger community who also experiences suffering, oppression and death today. The different interviews with the devotees of the dead Christ show that they see the connection and relevance of their devotion with their personal life, faith and daily concerns but very seldom one can see how their devotion is connected or helps them in developing their relationship and responsibility with their larger community.<sup>7</sup> This is what Segundo Galilea laments about in saying that devotions to Jesus “tends to absorb Jesus’ humanity in his divinity, such as his humanity ceases to be an inspiration and guide for ordinary life. Jesus is seen as the symbol of divine power and salvation, but hardly as a model to follow in day by day imitation.”<sup>8</sup> This paper attempts to address this concern by attempting to bring out the social significance of Christ’s death and how his death not only shows God’s loving sacrifice but also inspires people to act against the different realities that bring suffering and death to human life.

### **The Significance of the Image of Death**

In the Philippines, death is not merely a passive event. Death has a social effect and significance. The cases of killings that are happening in the Philippine streets today ignite different protests against violations of life and human dignity. Local and foreign media’s coverage of the dead bodies wrapped in packaging tapes, plastics and cardboards appeal to the social sense of many which lead to the denunciations of the killings that are happening in the Philippine society today. Something happens to people when they

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<sup>5</sup>Homer Yabut, “Apung Mamacalulu: Ang Sto. Entiero ng Pamnpanga,” *Dalumat Dobleng Isyu* Tomo 4, Blg. 1&2 (2013) 10.

<sup>6</sup>Homer Yabut, “Apung Mamacalulu: Ang Sto. Entiero ng Pamnpanga,” 10-11.

<sup>7</sup>See the examples in the following books: Fenella Cannell, *Power and Intimacy in the Christian Philippines*, Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1999; Sony A. Ordoña, *Lolo Uweng ng Landayan Buhay na Hesus sa Banal na Libingan*, San Pablo, Laguna: Biblio de ESDM de Landayan, 2010; Homer Yabut, “Apung Mamacalulu: Ang Sto. Entiero ng Pamnpanga,” *Dalumat eJournal, Dobleng Isyu* Tomo 4, Blg. 1&2 (2013).

<sup>8</sup>Segundo Galilea, *An Attempt to Describe Popular Religiosity*, 64.

look at dead bodies. It is as if, the dead, though lifeless, communicates something powerful and profound to the looking and reflecting individual.

The historian Vicente L. Rafael reflects on the significance of the deaths of two Filipinos to the Philippine society.<sup>9</sup> One of which is the death of the former Philippine senator Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino, Jr. and the other is of the Filipina worker in Singapore, Flor Contemplacion.

When Ninoy was assassinated in 1983, his death draws thousands of mourners who later on became united and staged the historic people power revolution of 1986. Though dead, Ninoy became a powerful figure and influence for the people. Through the image of the dead Ninoy, whose appearance was not fixed anymore by a mortician for the world to see the traces of blood and the bullet hole in his head,<sup>10</sup> somehow, the people reflected about democracy and are inspired to fight for their freedom and rights.

The second example is the death of a Filipina domestic helper in Singapore, Flor Contemplacion. When Contemplacion was killed through a death sentence, a cry of pity and outrage sprang out from the Filipino masses. Reflecting on the story of Contemplacion, the Filipino masses immediately relate with her because her suffering connects with the experiences of many Filipinos especially those who work abroad “whose travels and labours were not merely selfish acts of escape or betrayal, but reflections of the courage and willingness of a people to sacrifice and if need be, die for one another.”<sup>11</sup> The dead body of Contemplacion, that still bears the mark of the rope on her neck, allowed the people to relate with her suffering and struggle, and her to relate with them. Their sympathy for Contemplacion appealed to them and gave them a sense of nationalism and patriotism.

Looking at both the deaths of Ninoy and Contemplacion, it can be said that the dead and their appearance offer a kind of message that speaks powerfully to the living and gives them meaning. The bodies of the dead could become symbols and these symbols have the potential to dispose people to see deeper realities that could guide and inspire their life. This symbolic character that the dead bodies have can also be seen in the image of the dead Christ.

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<sup>9</sup>Vicente L. Rafael, “Your Grief Is Our Gossip: Overseas Filipinos and Other Spectral Presences,” *Public Culture* 9, 2 (1997) 267-291.

<sup>10</sup>Vicente L. Rafael, “Your Grief Is Our Gossip,” 285.

<sup>11</sup>Vicente L. Rafael, “Your Grief Is Our Gossip,” 283.

When one looks at the image of the dead Christ, one can see the image of Jesus' bloody and violated body. One can see the traces of lashes that left their marks on the skin of Christ. One can see the traces of blood that bled out from his veins draining him of life. His flesh, faded and darkened by dirt and heat, can be seen from the holes left by the nails and crown of thorns. The wound that the soldier's spear made at his side can be seen leading towards his merciful heart. His eyes and mouth that have searched for the lost and have proclaimed love and forgiveness for all, now show the thirst and exhaustion he experienced during his slow and painful death. All these marks are symbols that could powerfully communicate and ignite something very deep and profound in the mind and heart of the looking and reflecting devotee.

In the Philippines, when one sees a person with bruises and wounds, the natural initial reaction is to ask, "What happened to you? How did you get those wounds? Who did that to you and why?" After those questions, a deep insistent feeling will come out from within saying, "That reality should not happen to you or to anyone again (especially when those wounds are products of injustice), because it is clearly wrong." In the same way, if a believer will take time to look deeper at the image of the dead Christ and allow oneself to reflect on the image, the very image of the dead Christ invites the person to ask the same questions and say to oneself, "What happened to Jesus? Who did this to him and why? This should not have happened to him or happen again to anyone because this is evil and this is clearly wrong." When one reaches that point, a spark of social concern might begin to creep into one's consciousness. This will especially be true when that devotee is drawn to understand the meaning of Jesus' death from Scriptures.

### **Jesus' Death, A Product of Social Injustice and Oppression**

During his public ministry, Jesus attended to the immediate poverty that people experienced such as hunger and sickness as much as he attended immediately to the spiritual needs of people. He healed the sick (Mt 9:35, Mk 2:9-12, Lk 17:12-16, Jn 9:6-7), he fed people (Mt 14:13-21; Mk 6:30-44; Lk 9:10-17; Jn 6:1-15), he forgave them their sins (Mt 9:2-6, Mk 2:1-12, Lk 7:48, Jn 7:53-8:11) and accepted sinners and outcasts in his company (Mt 9:10-13, Mk 2:13-17, Lk 19:1-10, Jn 4:1-42). Jesus also opposed forms of discriminations, ignorance, insensitivity, greed, and self-seeking pride that are present in their society (Mt 5-7). He corrected their religious practices that focused on the externals of the law and emphasized the importance

of interiority and sincerity (Mk 7:1-23). He also engaged in dialogue with their religious leaders about the deeper understanding and interpretation of the law (Lk 13:10).

The actions of Jesus did not come to pass in the eyes of the Jewish religious leadership. The Sanhedrin paid a very close surveillance of Jesus. In their eyes, Jesus' actions were inordinate. His actions have gone beyond the limits and disrespected the law and God. They said to one another, "Who does he think he is? That's blasphemy!" (Lk 5:21). For them, the blessings of God must be contained only for the righteous who follow the law and should not be given to the rabble, to the sick who have sinned, and definitely not to the foreigners who are impure and unchosen people of God. When they saw Jesus eating with the tax collectors, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" (Mt 9:11). For them, Jesus' actions were way out. They are outrageous and scandalous. They are blasphemous and unacceptable. However, the more they discredited Jesus, the more people came to him to seek understanding, healing and forgiveness. His followers grew and the Pharisees and Scribes became afraid of the people (Lk 22:2).

As a result, the only thing that they could do is to destroy Jesus. They plotted to kill him (Mt 26:4). It has been taught that Jesus' death is his sacrificial offering to the Father for the forgiveness of sins. This is true and correct because Jesus did lay down his life freely for all and for the Father. But while this is true and correct, the Jesuit theologian, Carlos Abesamis, believes that it is important to recover the deeper historical aspect why Jesus was killed because without it, his death cannot be explained and be significant especially to the Third World today.<sup>12</sup>

Jesus' suffering and death was not just an obedient self-surrender to death for the Father. Jesus did not wish or plan to die. During his public ministry, he withdrew from occasions where he knows he is in danger or there are dangerous plots for him (Mt 12:15, Jn 8:59). He even prayed in Gethsemane that his death be taken away from him (Lk 22:44), yet, he was willing to receive death if that is the payment he has to give for fulfilling his mission from the Father. On the night of the Passover, Jesus was betrayed. He was sold for the love of money. Then he was arrested that night where he was placed in trial in the hands of wicked judges where "many bare false witnesses

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<sup>12</sup>Carlos H. Abesamis, SJ, *A Third Look at Jesus*, Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1999, 194.

against him" (Mk 14:56). "Even then their testimony did not agree (Mk 14:57)," they sentenced him to death because of their wickedness and lust for power. They accused him of blasphemy and later on, treason. They said, "We found this fellow perverting the nation, and forbidding to give tribute to Caesar, saying that he himself is Christ a King" (Lk 23:2,3). When Pilate tried to avoid the death of Jesus by chastising him and offering them a choice whether to free Jesus or Barabbas, they shouted, "No, not him! Give us Barabbas!" (Jn 18:40). Thus, even in a bothering conscience and for the sake of his position and fear of the people, Pilate said, "I am innocent of this man's blood," "It is your responsibility!" (Mt 27:24). Pilate gave Jesus to the Jews to be mocked, to be violated and be killed. Jesus' death was the consequence of his struggle against the structures and powers in the society that oppressed and enslaved people. His death was a product of injustice, a broken society, and a corrupt government that is driven by pride, fear, envy and thirst for power. Jesus' death therefore exposes the evil and ugliness of the sins of this world and its power in creating ignorance, oppression, injustice, corruption and death (CFC, 557).

The evil realities that caused the suffering and death of Jesus left their mark on his dead body and these wounds shout in protest the woundedness of humanity. Jesus' wounds bear the marks of oppression, wounds that resemble the inner wounds that the oppressed people in the society bear today, wounds that could remind the believers of the wounds of the slain persons who, like Jesus, suffered oppression and death because of the evils of corruption and injustice.

When asked what he thinks when he is looking at the image of the dead Christ, a regular church goer said, "You will see in his face the anguish of not only on man [sic], but of the world."<sup>13</sup> Could it be that in Christ's death and wounds, the Filipino believers could see that their sufferings also belong to Jesus and Jesus' suffering also belongs to them? Could it be that through those wounds, they could see that their "deaths" belong to Jesus, and his death belongs to them? In the image of the dead Jesus, the devotees can see the image of their experiences, struggles and oppressed humanity. His dead body draws them towards him and that could evoke in them the consciousness that asks the questions such as: "Why did this death happen, why is it still happening today? What are we called to do to stop it and to make it right?"

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<sup>13</sup>Personal interview with a devotee, conversation made on July 19, 2016.

## The Demands of the Dead Jesus

The experience of death is a tragic one. Yet death, while devastating, could evoke deeper realizations and actions towards a better life. Our experience of friends or family members dying of sickness such as cancer or diabetes evokes in us a more responsible action towards good health. Our experience of catastrophic disasters such as strong typhoons and flooding moves us to work towards a more responsible use of the environment. The rampant cases of extra-judicial killings and the move to re-impose death penalty in some countries spur protests to respect and protect life. In the Philippines, the violation against the human rights during the Martial Law years in the Marcos regime incited a deep groaning for liberation and respect for life that was expressed by the people's cry "Tama na! Sobra na! Palitan na! (Enough! That's too much! Change it now!). This cry eventually led to the People Power Revolution at EDSA in 1986. After the revolution, the people who experienced the evils of the Martial Law still cry today saying "Never again!"

In the same way, by looking at the image of the dead Jesus, devotees are also confronted with a tragic reality that calls and demands for change. The image of the dead Christ shows the One who did nothing but to free and to love, yet was killed by the connivance of people possessed by their hatred, greed, and lust for power. They are confronted with an image of someone who is like them, "a simple peasant or worker (who) is abused and humiliated, together with his loved ones, by evil men."<sup>14</sup> Many people today already find it hard to take the suffering and death of innocent persons in the society. When they look closer at the image of the dead Jesus, they could discover the death not just of an innocent person but the murder of the all loving and humble God-man who wished nothing but the well-being of all persons. The image of the dead Jesus does not only present an experience of oppression, of humiliation or suffering but a protest about the sacrilege done against human life and dignity. The image of the dead Jesus presents the deepest, most devastating and darkest experience of life, that is unjust and oppressive death.

The fullness of life which we long for comes to awareness in counterpoint with the concrete reality of suffering and death.<sup>15</sup> In other words, the experience of suffering and death we encounter

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<sup>14</sup>Benigno Beltran, *The Christology of the Inarticulate*, 138.

<sup>15</sup>Kathleen McManus, "Embracing Life, Embracing the Cross," *The Way* 44, 1 (January, 2005) 64.



move us to create a peaceful world without pain, violence and suffering and to go after that vision by all means.<sup>16</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx called this experience as the “negative contrast experience.”<sup>17</sup> This concept tells that our negative experiences give rise to inner self-protest that spurs from us desires towards active change. The negative reality we encounter conveys a moral sense of obligation that moves us towards actions that will create an alternative reality from that negative experience we encounter. Schillebeeckx said that, “Man’s experience of suffering presupposes an implicit craving for happiness, a craving for well-being or ‘making whole’; and as unjust suffering it implies at least a vague consciousness of what in a positive sense human integrity or wholeness should entail.”<sup>18</sup> In the Church, the image of the dead Christ is one of the Christological images that convey strong negative contrast experience.

At the sight of the image of the dead Jesus, devotees could see the image of injustice and inhuman oppression. They are confronted by the ugliest reality of sin against God and against humanity. Looking deeper at the image of Jesus’ dead body, they could see their failures, lack of compassion, violations of life, and ultimately, their rejection of God. Looking at the image of the dead Jesus, they could see what was almost lost and destroyed, the image of the loving God both in us and in Jesus. They mourn for this destruction, and this mourning morally demands of them that something must be done, something that prevents such destruction to happen again to anyone, anywhere and anytime.

Looking at the image of the dead Jesus, devotees could be confronted with the question, “Is this the image of humanity we desire for ourselves and for our fellow human beings? Is it the future and the end we wish for our brothers and sisters, our families and friends to have?” Surely not! By these questions, the devotees will hopefully be moved to act and work for whatever they can do to stop this kind of death to happen. They will hopefully be moved and

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<sup>16</sup>Edward Ruigrok, “The Negative Contrsat Experience as Part of the Identity of the Christian Peace Movement Pax Christi,” see pdf copy at <https://www.google.com.ph/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0ahUKEwidjsGHmPLNAhWIpZQKHbsiAgoQFggcMAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fschillebeeckx.nl%2Fwp-content%2Fuploads%2F2012%2F04%2FRuigrok-1.pdf&usg=AFQjCNHQAA2GTrjxTWxrTRALSetkyBpCDw&sig2=Lzh0rEM4XM8xECbiuDT0GA>, accessed July 15, 2016.

<sup>17</sup>Edward Schillebeeckx, *God the Future of Man*, trans. Theodore Westow, New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968, 143-166.

<sup>18</sup>Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, trans. Hubert Hoskins, New York, Crossroad Publishing Company, 1981, 616.

inspired from within to reject any form of reality that leads any human person to such oppressive and destructive situations and be morally obliged to work for justice, for protection of life and for liberation. This is an inner movement that other image or titles of Christ cannot easily bring about without reference to the image of the dead Jesus.

The image of the dead Jesus could present more questions than answers. Questions that direct the believers to become self-reflective and discerning. Jesus is the question that interrogates life. His dead image inquires, "Why have you persecuted me? What have you done? Why have you forsaken me? When I was hungry, why did you not feed me, I was homeless, yet why did you not welcome me in your home? While these questions will bother the tranquility of many, these questions have the potential to dispose them to confront the situation of the world. A situation where people are dead and dying because of the evils and oppression in the world that leaves their marks in the wounds of the dead Jesus.

By looking deeper at the image of the dead Christ, the greatest alternative reality that one could see and cry out is the protection and promotion of life. Life must be respected and be upheld at all times by all means. Protection of life in all its aspects; social, physical and spiritual. But into what actions could the image of the dead Christ dispose believers to commit themselves especially now in these trying times where even the historical violations against life seem to be forgotten already by many and more and more killings happen? While not being exhaustive, here are some of the answers that could be said.

The image of the dead Jesus disposes the devotees to be critical to the world powers that has direct effects on human life whether it is political, traditional or religious. Jesus' death was the result of the unjust religious and political systems that instead of freeing and protecting human persons, enslaved and oppressed them. Jesus was ready to refute any law that did not promote genuine welfare and good for the human persons. He said, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mk 2:27). He is ready to cross boundaries if the demarcation between the Jews and the Samaritans prevents him to reach out to those who need mercy. Thus, he engaged even in public in her own territory the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:4-42) who, though considered by their society as someone who belonged to those considered as unclean, was valuable to God. Jesus is prepared to push deeper or even reinterpret any law that does not serve and promote the good of the human persons. He said, "You

have heard that it was said..., but I tell you..." (Mt 5:21-22). He is never afraid to engage in dialogue with authorities and religious leaders in his time to correct their wrong understanding and application of the law (see Mk 12). In the same way, faith in Jesus demands that his disciples do not just follow blindly the laws imposed on them, whether by the religious or political leaders. They are morally obliged to be critical and be ready to refute and go against any reality that becomes oppressive to human life and dignity.

The image of the dead Jesus, while disposing the devotees to be ready to struggle, also sets them into an active yet non-violent struggle. During his Public Ministry, Jesus refused to use violence. He lived out his non-violent stance against oppression even until his death. This does not however mean being passive to the destructive and oppressive realities in the society for passivity to injustice is already an act of siding with the oppressed. When Jesus was arrested, most of his disciples refused to go against the unjust arrest of Jesus. That passivity caused the life of Jesus. Active non-violence means that they are to oppose every kind of violence, yet refuse to enact violence against their oppressors. For the goal "is not the victory of the oppressed over the oppressors, but the restoration of justice, equality, and fellowship for all, who will then live and work together as a community."<sup>19</sup>

Therefore, this non-violent stance against the oppressors does not mean passive acceptance of the oppression. It still entails a struggle to refuse and stop the oppression even to the point of death. But this struggle does not mean fighting violence with violence, destruction with destruction, fire against fire. This struggle rejects and fights oppression but chooses to love and change the oppressors. It upholds Jesus' commandment to "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Mt 5:38-39), yet "hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Mt 5:6). People who adapt this non-violent struggle are ready and willing to do whatever they can to restore justice and mercy and protect these values even at the cause of their own lives. This non-violent struggle has been lived out already by individuals such as Ninoy Aquino, Mahatma Ghandi and Archbishop Oscar Romero.

Lastly, the image of the dead Jesus disposes the devotees in an attitude where, after giving all their efforts to the struggle for justice, they let God be God and surrender to God's mysterious yet faithful

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<sup>19</sup>Amaladoss, *The Asian Jesus*, 63.

love for them. In the night before Jesus died, he prayed to the Father saying, "Father, if You are willing, take this cup from Me. Yet not My will, but Yours be done" (Lk 22:42). Before the moment of his death, Jesus called out with a loud voice and said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Lk 23:46). Jesus did all what he can and have to do, yet in the end, he acknowledged and surrendered everything to the will of the Father. In the same way, after doing what we can and what we have to do against the oppressive realities in the society today, the image of the dead Jesus invites the devotees to put and surrender their life and efforts to God. They cannot solve and end the oppression in the world by themselves. They have to play their part and yet, let God take the rest. No human person can finally and totally destroy sin, evil and oppression. It is only God. Yet God needs each person to work for something, and then let God finish evil and oppression in God's own time and way.