Filipino Popular Devotions:
Legacy of Five Centuries of Catholic Faith[1]

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As we look forward to celebrating the 500th anniversary of Christianity in the Philippines in 2021, who would ever imagine that we who are still living will witness this momentous event in our lifetime? We praise and thank God for the gift of 500 years of faith that has blessed millions of Filipinos all over the world, then and now. In this era of new evangelization, the upcoming quincentennial becomes an opportunity for the renewal of our faith and the exploration of new avenues for mission. In the words of Pope-Emeritus Benedict XVI: "Today…there is a need for stronger ecclesial commitment to new evangelization to rediscover the joy of believing and the enthusiasm for communicating the faith."[2]

Nine-Year Preparation Period

As early as 2012, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) already mapped out a nine-year program to spiritually prepare its flock for this momentous

1 A Paper presented last 5 October 2019 at Saint Michael Catholic Church, Livermore California, Diocese of Oakland. "Celebrating our Faith from the Islands to the Mainland: Understanding and Appreciating Filipino Spirituality and Religiosity, *Pananampalataya* (Faith), *Panalangin* (Prayer), *Pagsasabuhay* (Living the Faith)."

2 Benedict XVI, *Porta Fidei*, 11 October 2011, *Vatican Archive*, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_ben-xvi_motu-proprio_20111011_porta-fidei.html (accessed 23 July 2019), no. 7.

event. Translating the nine pastoral priorities of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines[3] into meaningful themes, the CBCP specified what to celebrate for each year, namely: 1) 2013: *Year of Integral Faith Formation* which coincided with the International Year of Faith declared by Pope-Emeritus Benedict XVI, deepened our understanding of the "12 articles of Faith" in the Apostles Creed; 2) 2014: *Year of the Laity* further inculcated in our lay faithful the gift and task of their baptism so as to be authentic and effective agents of evangelization; 3) 2015: *Year of the Poor* blessed us with the Apostolic Visit of the Holy Father to our country wherein Pope Francis showed us how the poor evangelizes us to achieve our vision to be Church of the Poor; 4) 2016: *Year of the Eucharist and the Family*, preceded by the 2014 and 2015 Synods on the Family, highlighted by the 51st International Eucharistic Congress, synchronizing the Eucharist and the family as focal points for evangelization and mission; 5) 2017: *Year of the Parish* as a Communion of Communities emphasized how the parish can achieve communion through Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs), covenanted faith-communities and ecclesial movements; 6) 2018: *Year of the Clergy and Consecrated Persons* stressed the need for bishops, priests, religious and consecrated laity to live the evangelical counsels and become renewed servant-leaders

3 The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II) took place from 20 January to 17 February 1991. On 22 July 1992, the Decrees of PCP II were promulgated. In 2001, a National Pastoral Consultation on Church Renewal (NPCCR) was held to assess the implementation of the Decrees of PCP II and set clearer pastoral priorities of the local church in the Philippines. These priorities are specified in the message for the NPCCR of CBCP President. Cf. Orlando B. Quevedo, O.M.I, D.D. "Behold I make All Things New," *CBCP Archive*, http://cbcponline.net/behold-i-make-all-things-new-rev-215/(accessed 23 July 2019).

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of Church; 7) 2019: *Year of the Youth* was coincidentally preceded by the 2018 Synod on the Youth, with the goal to animate our young people for greater participation in parish service and help them discern their vocation in the world and in the Church; 8) 2020: *Year of Ecumenism, Inter-Religious Dialogue and Indigenous Peoples* hopes to explore new paths of communion with our brothers and sisters belonging to different Christian faith affiliations, other religions, and our indigenous peoples through open, honest, respectful, loving dialogue of life also manifested in prayer and action; 9) 2021: Year *Missio Ad Gentes* will move us forward to become missionaries in our own homes, in our country and in the world, especially inspired by our Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) and many Filipino migrants in all continents of the globe who have become instruments of propagating the Catholic faith in word and witness.[4] In effect, the nine-year preparatory period serves as a kind of "novena" building up to the solemn celebration of the quincentennial.

Growth of Filipino Catholic Population

In 1521, the Spanish missionaries brought Christianity to the Philippines. Since then, the Filipino Catholic population has continued to grow. Of around 1.3 billion Catholics in the world, approximately 141 million are in Asia, and 83 million are in the Philippines. We are ranked third in the world in terms of having the most number of Catholics after Mexico and Brazil.[5] Likewise, the majority of Catholics in Asia are

4 Cf. Jose S. Palma, D.D., "Live Christ, Share Christ," 23 July 2012, *CBCP Archive*, http://cbcponline.net/cbcp-pastoral-exhortation-on-the-era-of-new-evangelization-longer-version/ (accessed 23 July 2019).

5 The top five countries in terms of the Catholic population are ranked as follows: 1) Brazil--172.2 million, 2) Mexico--110.9

found in our country, which is one of only two predominantly Catholic countries in the continent, alongside Timor Leste.

In recent decades, the phenomenon of migration spread the Filipino Catholic population to all continents of the world. For instance, it is estimated that there are now over four million Filipino Americans (Fil-Ams) residing in the USA, of which 2.6 million are Catholics.[6] The biggest number of Fil-Ams reside in California, numbering approximately one million, with San Francisco Bay Area having the densest concentration.[7] With these statistics, one can surmise how Catholic Filipino-Americans vibrantly manifest their spirituality and religiosity in their homes and parish churches. They bring with them their distinct local faith traditions, especially in the form of local popular devotions, and share them with the communities they go to.

Wherever they are, Filipino Catholics are immediately recognized by their prayer life. Even in the global diaspora, one of the things that usually bind Filipinos is praying and worshipping God together. Together with the centrality of the Eucharist in one's life of faith and the need for conversion to become truly authentic disciples of Christ, the CBCP has also identified the necessity of prayer as a faith imperative in need of renewed integral evangelization. They pointed out:

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million, 3) Philippines--83.6 million, 4) USA--72.3 million, 5) Italy—58 million. Cf. The Pontifical Yearbook 2017 and the "Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae" 2015, 06.04.2017, *Vatican Archive,* http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2017/04/06/170406e.html (accessed 23 July 2019).

6 Cf. "Demographics of Filipino Americans," *Wikipedia,* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Filipino Americans#Religion (accessed 23 July 2019).

7 Cf. Efren S. Cruz, "Notes on the Filipino American Community," Philippine Star Archive, https://www.philstar.com/opinion/2016/01/16/1543419/notes-filipino-american-community (accessed 23 July 2019).

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> We believe that the Holy Spirit is the main agent of evangelization. Every evangelizer, therefore, has to be led and driven by the Spirit, even as Jesus was in His proclaiming of the Kingdom of God (see Lk. 3:22; 4:1,14). And it is through prayer that we are able to listen to the Holy Spirit and do his bidding. It is by the Holy Spirit that we are able to call on God, Abba. It is by the Holy Spirit that we are able to follow in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus and tell His story to others. In our context, our people's fidelity to prayer through religious devotions and practices – through their popular religiosity and piety – is an enduring witness to their acceptance of the Good News of Jesus. Hence, the New Evangelization has to be accompanied by prayer and contemplation. We are called to rekindle the spirit and practice of prayer among us and foster a renewal of popular religiosity and piety in its different forms and practices.[8]

Filipinos and Popular Devotions

Filipinos are intrinsically religious. Even before Christianity came to the Philippines, Filipinos already had faith and beliefs they hold on to. For instance, the early natives thought that nature itself and certain natural elements have sacred powers. They also acknowledged "Bathala" as the supreme being who watches over them along with the "anitos" as demi-gods/goddesses who serve as their mediator to the ultimate god "Bathala." It was in this context and setting that the foreign missionaries were able to introduce Christianity to the native Filipinos rather easily. Their natural propensity to faith and a very religious social climate made it easy for them to accept Christian doctrines. Slowly, they were able

8 Cf. Jose S. Palma, D.D., "Live Christ, Share Christ," 23 July 2012, *CBCP Archive*, http://cbcponline.net/cbcp-pastoral-exhortation-on-the-era-of-new-evangelization-longer-version/ (accessed 23 July 2019).

to shift from the olden rituals, ceremonies, prayers, and other forms of worship accorded to "Bathala" and to the "anitos" towards the Christian belief system and way of life. Some helpful elements and religious expressions were retained and became inculturated, especially in the form of local customs and popular devotions.

Many of these popular devotions became known because of lay or ordinary people - individuals as well as families - who initiated these rituals and celebrations. Their expressions of love towards God are made visible and experiential through these popular devotions. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, these devotions become so embedded in devotees' lives even to the point of binding themselves to a commitment of keeping such devotion throughout their life, which in the Philippines is called "panata."

Nonetheless, we also have to be wary of possible excesses, which is sometimes the undesirable result of an unchecked fervor. One notable example is the "panata" of having oneself physically crucified on a Good Friday, which the Church now explicitly discourages. Some devotions may even lead to superstitious beliefs that are not compatible with our faith. Not surprisingly, non-Catholics at times would challenge the biblical basis and spiritual import of these popular devotions. Sometimes, even Catholics who could not understand or stand such popular devotions end up leaving the Church.

However, popular devotions guided by sound doctrine and illumined by the transforming Word of God can be potent instruments for the New Evangelization being offered by the Church in the Philippines to Asia and to the whole world.

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Popular Devotions and Theology

Popular devotions have a profound theological basis since they emanate from human experience, where God also reveals himself. This kind of theology is what we call "theology from below." As Mercado says, "in order to be able to offer all of them the mystery of salvation and the life brought by God, the Church must become part of all these groups for the same motive which led Christ to bind himself, in virtue of His incarnation, to the definite social and cultural conditions of those human beings among He dwelt."[9] In Sacred Scripture and in the Tradition of the Church, this Incarnational model is proclaimed and celebrated. For example, in John 1:14, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. In the Angelus, the prayer states that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Even in the Apostles Creed, the doctrine says that the Lord was conceived and born of the Blessed Virgin Mary, through the power of the Holy Spirit. The incarnation of Christ is the summary of His life, teachings, miracles, passion, death, and resurrection. Therefore, when the incarnated God, Jesus, dwelt among the people, He immersed into their culture and proclaimed the truth and the love of God, thereby becoming a matrix for a Church that dwells with the people.

The Church must follow the example of Jesus, the Incarnate Word, in relating with our people and our culture because through this, the truth and love of God are made manifest where Filipino popular religious expressions embody a desire to experience the Divinity as near.[10] The devotees believe in the

9 Leonardo N. Mercado, *Inculturation and Filipino Theology* (Manila: Divine Word Publications, 1992), 30.

10 Segundo Galilea, *The Challenge of Popular Religiosity* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1988), 99.

presence of the living God and His work in their lives because truth and love exist in the ordinary events of their life.

"Filipinos are a people of the 'concrete.' Our thoughts and sentiments are expressed 'in the concrete.' This is an Asian trait."[11] That is why, for example, it is but natural for a devotee to spontaneously demonstrate his or her acts of devotion by dressing up, holding, kissing, or venerating a sacred image as one would do to someone valued and loved. However, people from other religions may not readily understand this and consider such gestures are remnants of our ancestral traditions, superstitious beliefs, and worse, as demonic acts of worshipping false gods.[12]

Still, for devotees, God is near and truly alive because they can easily express their pains, sufferings, and experiences through rituals, symbols, gestures, hymns, and prayers that are concrete expressions of faith understood by ordinary people because popular devotions were drawn from traditions, relationships and culture which are all experiential. Popular devotions are so easily said but not understood. According to B. Raas:

11 Msgr. Jose Clemente F. Ignacio, "Viva Nuestro Padre Jesus Nazareno! A Pastoral Understanding of the Devotion," *FilCatholic* 2(1): 27. See also Peter C. Phan, "Jesus the Christ with an Asian Face," *Theological Studies* 57 (1996): 399-430.

12 Carolyn Brewer, "Holy Confrontation: Religion, Gender, and Sexuality in the Philippines, 1521-1685," (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Murdoch, 1999).

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> "Popular means" related to people—to the people of God…they originate from the people at a certain time and in a given culture in a local Church from where they are disseminated and become widespread, some even becoming a universal practice… Popular means also that they are loved, cherished, and practiced by the people often more than the official liturgy of the Church. In these prayer forms, people find consolation and strength, and in them, they find an adequate expression of their faith, happiness, and satisfaction.[13]

According to the teachings of the Church, God revealed himself through His creation and to man by creating humans in His own image and likeness. The climax of God's revelation happened when He sent His only Son, the Ultimate Revelation, to proclaim God's kingdom.[14] Knowing and having God in their midst gives devotees the consolation that through popular devotions, they are able to express their deep faith in God in ordinary ways close to their hearts and minds. Nonetheless, it is also important to keep these always in check to prevent them from becoming totally subjective and purely sentimental. According to the *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy*, the Word of God plays an essential role in understanding popular devotions and making the celebration theologically sound and acceptable. It also helps to prevent unwanted excesses and abuses, as well as provides a sound basis and inspiration for popular devotions.

13 Bernhard Raas, SVD, *Popular Devotions: Making Popular Religious Practices More Potent Vehicles of Spiritual Growth* (Manila: Logos Publications, 2004), 15.

14 CBCP, *Ang Katesismo ng Simbahang Katolika, Isang Paglalagom* (*Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*), trans. in Filipino by Rev. Fr. Albert Flores, (Manila: Word and Life Publications, 2008), nos. 51-67.

> The Gospel is the measure against which all expressions of Christian piety - both old and new - must be measured. The task of evaluating devotional exercises and practices and of purifying them when necessary must be conducted against this criterion so as to ensure their proper relationship with the Christian mystery. What is said of the Christian Liturgy is also true of popular piety: 'it may never incorporate rites permeated by magic, superstition, animism, vendettas or sexual connotations'.
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> The Bible offers an inexhaustible source of inspiration to popular piety, as well as unrivaled forms of prayer and thematic subjects. Constant reference to Sacred Scripture is also a means and a criterion for curbing exuberant forms of piety frequently influenced by popular religion, which give rise to ambiguous or even erroneous expressions of piety.[15]

Popular Devotions and the Liturgy

According to the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, "Christ is always present in his Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations."[16] The liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount which all her power flows.[17] In relation to the liturgy, these popular devotions are rich sources for communicating the power of the Gospel. They are not a substitute for the divine liturgy, but

15 Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy Principles and Guidelines* (DPPL), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20020513_vers-direttorio_en.html# nos. 12 and 87. (accessed 25 July 2019).

16 Vatican II, "Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*)", 4 December 1963, in *Vatican Council II: Post Conciliar Documents Vol. I*, ed. Austin Flannery, (Pasay City: St. Paul Publications, 1984), no.7.

17 Ibid., no.10.

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they are a complementary means for communicating the good news of God's love and preparing the hearts of people for the encounter with Christ in the Eucharist.[18]

Popular devotions have an important role in gathering the community in order that everyone participates actively in liturgical celebrations. It is clear that popular devotions do not replace or substitute liturgical activities of the Church. Instead, we discover that popular devotions are tools or ways to better appreciate liturgical celebrations. Therefore, the relationship between the liturgy and popular piety, in our times, must be approached primarily from the perspective of the directives contained in the Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, which seeks to establish a harmonious relationship between both of these expressions of piety, in which popular piety is objectively subordinated to, and directed towards, the Liturgy.[19]

The harmony between popular devotions and liturgical celebrations rely on the leaders of the Church because they are the ones who motivate and inspire the people to appreciate and continue the celebrations that will indeed bring them closer to God. To do this, they will first have to understand these devotions, for which they need to be adequately familiar if not directly engaged with these devotions. In a letter of Saint John Paul II, he exhorted all bishops, priests, and deacons to promote and appreciate popular devotions.[20]

18 Archbishop José Gomez, "Liturgy, Popular Piety, and the New Evangelization," Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, 29 September 2016. https://www.archbishopgomez.org/article/liturgy-popular-piety-and-the-new-evangelization-584 (accessed 25 July, 2019).

19 *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy Principles and Guidelines* (DPPL), no. 50.

20 See Pope John Paull II, *Apostolic Letter on the Most Holy Rosary (Rosarium Virginis Mariae),* 16 October 2002 (Pasay City: Paulines, 2003), no. 43.

Popular Devotions and Culture

Culture is important because it reflects the language, action, and habits of a people. Culture is man-made. When man changes, culture follows. "Man comes to a true and full humanity only through culture, that is through the cultivation of the goods and values of nature. Wherever human life is involved, therefore, nature and culture are quite intimately connected one with the other."[21]

The Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel.[22] As such, the Church strives to be faithful to her mandate to integrate the Gospel values into the life of people, including their culture. Pope Francis reminds us that "it is imperative to evangelize cultures in order to inculturate the Gospel in countries of Catholic tradition, this means encouraging, fostering and reinforcing a richness which already exists."[23]

At the same time, it is also important to note that while the Church evangelizes cultures, cultures also influence Church's teachings. The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines calls this two-way process as inculturation. "In the process of inculturation the Church and the culture of people interact."[24] Thus, inculturation must be promoted and appreciated, particularly in the local Church. Where culture is sacred, it is

21 Cfr. Vatican II, "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *(Gaudium et Spes),*" 7 December 1965, in *Vatican Council II The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* Vol. I, ed. Austin Flannery (New York: Costello Publishing Co., 1984), no. 53.

22 Ibid., 4.

23 Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World (*Evangelii Gaudium*), (Pasay City: Paulines Publishing House, 2013), no. 69.

24 CBCP, *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines* (Pasay City: St. Paul Publications, 1992), no. 203.

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community-forming. Popular devotions are culturally framed and the product of inculturation.

Some Popular Devotions in the Philippines

Nuestro Padre Jesus Nazareno

The devotion to the Black Nazarene or Nuestro Padre Jesus Nazareno started more than 400 years ago in Intramuros and was eventually relocated to its present home in Quiapo, Manila. The devotion has also become widespread in the country and even across other nations. One of the most prominent aspects of the devotion is the annual "traslacion" or transfer of the image, which is celebrated every 9 January. Millions of devotees flood the streets of Manila in order to fulfill their "panata" to accompany the image in this solemn procession. Numerous studies have tried to discover the rootedness of this popular devotion, yet one truth appears to be constant and certain in the experience of devotees—the God we worship is with us. He lives among us. The Black Nazarene is a constant reminder of God's reassuring love that He is with us, and we are not alone as we carry our own cross and follow Him.

Sto. Niño

The image of Sto. Niño came with the Gospel as it first arrived on Philippine soil almost five hundred years ago. Since then, it has become one of the most popular Filipino devotions, with several festivals centering around this image of the Holy Child Jesus: "Sinulog" in Cebu, "Kahimunan" in Butuan, "Lakbayaw" in Tondo, "Dinagyang" in Iloilo, "Ati-atihan" in Kalibo, and even our own "Bambino" festival

in the Diocese of Pasig. The devotion to the Sto. Niño is a reflection on Jesus as a child. In his own childhood, the Lord embodies for us the Gospel values which he himself described as "being child-like" such as simplicity, humility, pureness of heart, and trust. These characteristics express total filial dependence on the Father. Our devotion to the Sto. Niño reflects our child-like attitude of surrender and obedience to the Father. In the Gospel, Jesus invited little children and said:

Truly I tell you, He said, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 18:2-4)

We, Filipinos, are fond of children. Hence, it is very easy for Filipinos to be captivated by the Holy Image of the Child Jesus. The image of the Lord as a child is not of weakness but rather an expression of hope. In his hand is a scepter that symbolizes Jesus as the Prince of Peace, and the globe pierced by the cross signifies that He died so that we may live.

Our Lady of Perpetual Help

In the Philippines, the devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help is often associated with Baclaran where the National Shrine in her honor is located, and with Wednesday, when the novena in her honor is said. The devotion was introduced in the country by the Redemptorists in the 1900s and became popular, especially after the Second World War. It is particularly known for the novena prayer, which has become widespread not only in the Philippines but worldwide.

Filipinos share a great love towards the Blessed Virgin Mary, even gaining the reputation of being "Pueblo Amante

De Maria" or a people dearly in love with Mary. Common among many Filipinos is their being close to their mothers. It is natural for them to run towards their mother in times of difficulty and need. Thus, this innate affection towards their own mothers became easily associated with Mary as Mother of Perpetual Help. Every Wednesday, thousands of devotees come to Baclaran with hope and confidence that their petitions will be fulfilled through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Notable in the image of Our Lady of Perpetual Help is the caring and loving nature of a mother who embraces her child in her arms. The compassionate look in Mary's eyes also draws more people to come to her for aid.

Conclusion

The devotions mentioned are familiar to us. Perhaps, some of us even grew up with them or had experienced joining them at one point in our life. These popular devotions have drawn and continue to draw many of our people closer to God. At the same time, especially in the context of the Filipino global diaspora, they are one of the gifts that Filipino Catholics can offer to the world as a contribution to the New Evangelization.

Nonetheless, many challenges remain as we stand at the threshold of the quincentennial of Christianity in the Philippines. We, Filipinos all over the world, are challenged to renew our commitment in proclaiming and living the Gospel. We should move on from being merely sacramentalized faithful to being a truly evangelized community of disciples and thus become credible evangelizers to all. A crucial aspect of this renewal, PCP II reminds us, is to revitalize also our life of worship, including our popular devotions:

> A renewed life of worship will also mean the critical and fervent use of popular religious practices. These religious practices are rich in values… towards popular religious practices, our attitude has to be one of critical respect, encouragement, and renewal… they have to be vitally related to Filipino life and serve the cause of full human development, justice, peace, and the integrity of creation.[25]

Thus, aside from helping believers grow in relationship with God and spiritual maturity, true devotion must also be characterized by being "mission-oriented" and "socially conscious." This is beautifully expressed in the Tagalog neologism, *Debo(mi)syon*, which combines devotion and mission in one word. The message of *debo(mi)syon* proposes a synthesis between religious expression and social awareness[26] in an effort to make popular devotion an integral part of a holistic and dynamic Christian faith.

25 Ibid., nos. 172 and 175.

26 J. Cornelio, "Popular Religion and the Turn to Everyday Authenticity; Reflections on the Contemporary Study of the Philippine Catholicism," *Journal of Philippine Studies* 62 (2014): 418.

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