Apung Mamacalulu: The Lord Who Is Mercy

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The death of Jesus meant different things to different people. For the Jewish religious leaders, it was the end of a trouble-making and blasphemous itinerant preacher. For the Romans, perhaps the termination of another threat to their rule. For some disciples, it implied the loss of their hope for Israel's redemption from their oppressors. For Jesus himself, as prefigured in the Last Supper, it was a life-giving surrender of his own life, the fullest expression of his love and service, and of his obedience to God's will. As it has been interpreted in various ways before, so it is interpreted in many more ways in our time.

For the people of Angeles City, Pampanga, the death of Jesus is God's *mercy-ing* embodied in the age-old devotion to the *Apung Mamacalulu*. The *Apu,* as called by the locals, is the image of the Dead Christ in the sepulcher. Sources say that in 1828, the parish priest of Holy Rosary Parish in Angeles City had this image of the Dead Christ sculpted. The devotion to the *Apu* began when, according to legend, a certain Roman Payumu miraculously escaped his unjust trial and execution from the *guardia civil*, through the intercession of *Apu*.[1]

1 Francis Musni, "The Strange Case of the Two Images of *Apu*ng Mamacalulu," http://andalltheangelsandsaints.blogspot.com/2010/06/16-strange-case-of-two-images-of-*Apu*ng.html?m=1 (accessed 12 March 2019).

The peculiar name of the image reflects its meaning and significance to its devotees. God is referred to by Kapampangan people, as "*Apung Guinu*." While "*Guinu*" means "Lord," "*Apu*" is used to address elders, both male or female, thus connoting reverence, wisdom and guidance, authority and assistance. "*Mamacalulu*" is usually translated as "merciful;" however, it is actually stated in the active voice to mean that *Apu* shows and acts out of mercy. Briefly put, *Apung Mamacalulu* is the Lord who shows mercy.

The devotion to the *Apung Mamacalulu* is toward Jesus Christ himself, who "for us men (sic) and for our salvation, came down from heaven… and was incarnate… and became man."[2] In God's desire to bring all things to himself, he himself became human to lead all humanity, and all creation, back to union with him. It was God's will and pleasure to initiate this relationship with us, out of his divine goodness (cf. Eph 1:9). God has always willed it so, that even in the past, God has revealed himself and his divine will[3], first through the wonders of creation, and then by reaching out to a people beginning with Israel. He made himself known through his creation, through many signs and wonders, and through the words of the prophets and other chosen men, to communicate his divine self, and his divine will to humanity. This is the only way we can come to understand God, who is beyond us by means of these earthly realities that communicate realities beyond this earth, which humanity cannot otherwise know.[4]

2 Vatican II, *Decree on Religious Freedom* Dignitatis Humanae, in *Documents of Vatican Council II*, ed. James H. Kroeger (Pasay City: Paulines Publishing House, 2011), par. 150. Hereafter DH.

3 Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* Dei Verbum, in *Documents of Vatican Council II*, ed. James H. Kroeger (Pasay City: Paulines Publishing House, 2011), par. 2. Hereafter DV. cf. also Eph 1:9, DV6

4 Cf. DV3

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In this way, God has always reached out to us and has given us the capacity to know him and to respond to his invitation to friendship.

In the fullness of time, however, God revealed his very self to us in a way unsurpassed by any other revelation, through his incarnate Son. The Letter to the Hebrews puts it together thus, "in many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world."[5] God has fully revealed himself in his incarnate Son, Jesus, who became man and like the rest of humanity in all things but sin.[6] In Jesus, the Word made flesh, God has revealed himself to us by becoming human himself.[7] This is the faith of the Church proclaimed and passed on through the centuries: Jesus, the Son of God incarnate, who proclaimed the Kingdom of God on earth, and is savior for us all through his life, death, and resurrection.

This mystery of God's becoming man in Jesus becomes a reality accessible to the common believer through *Apung Mamacalulu.* Albeit depicted as Jesus laid in the tomb, it is a devotion to the God-who-is-with-us, and who is like us, accompanying humanity to the very end of human life on earth. Thus, the image of the dead Christ points to God incarnate in Jesus being with us in suffering, forsakenness, devastation, "even unto death."[8] Moreover, it reveals to us God who is not only God for himself, but God who relates with us.

5 DV4, cf. Heb 1:1-2
6 ND 301, cf. Heb 4:15
7 DV4
8 Phil 2:8.

In this devotion to *Apu,* a devotee is drawn towards a response to this revelation. God has given us the capacity to respond to his revelation, in faith.[9] In faith, man surrenders himself to God, who reveals God's self by entering into a personal relationship, a friendship with God. The Church believes that God continues to provide humanity the necessary help to understand what he has revealed in the course of history through the Holy Spirit. This happens in particular cultures, traditions, and sets of values; because revelation, which happens in history, also involves the consciousness of individuals and of a people, shaped by a particular history.

This encounter and relationship with God is preserved and passed on through generations by written and unwritten means: through the Scriptures, and through the ways that the faith is lived-out by the believers.[10] As God has always done, God continues to reveal himself, and gives himself to humanity through creation, through the Church, through events and experiences that happen in history, and especially through the symbols that we have used to express such faith.

Animated by the Spirit, and nourished and deepened through prayer, worship, and the sacraments, this faith has taken root in different cultures and has borne fruit in local expressions of the same faith, reflective of the culture and traditions of the receiving and living community. These local expressions of faith continue to serve as media of God's revelation to the community. These local symbols that have sprung from living out the faith have also become avenues for passing on the faith through generations, and for living out the faith in concrete ways. This means that the faith does not remain extrinsic to a believing community. It becomes

9 DV5
10 DV7

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part of the believing community's life. Thus, the International Theological Commission (ITC), in the document "*Sensus Fidei* in the Life of the Church," says that [Vatican II] clearly teaches that the faithful are not only recipients of the faith, as if it is only handed on to them by the Church. Rather, they are active subjects of living out this faith day in and day out in their particular contexts, and by their lives pass on the faith through generations.[11] The Catechism also teaches that "all the faithful share in understanding and handing on revealed truth"[12] through the power of the Spirit. Furthermore, *Sensus Fidei* understands the role of the believers' sense of the faith as enabling the faithful:

> 1) to discern whether or not a particular teaching or practice that they actually encounter in the Church is coherent with the true faith by which they live in the communion of the Church; 2) to distinguish in what is preached between the essential and the secondary and 3) to determine and put into practice the witness to Jesus Christ that they should give in the particular historical and cultural context in which they live.

The faith being practiced and witnessed to through local symbols is what we have come to term as "popular piety." Popular Piety is the faith incarnate in a particular culture, in a particular group of people. Thus, Pope Benedict XVI says that in it, "the faith has taken flesh and blood."[13] Through this, the faith "has entered human hearts and become part of the common patrimony of sentiments and customs, shaping the

11 The International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church* (2014), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html (accessed 02 April 2019), no. 60, hereafter SF.

12 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Manila: Word and Life Publications, 1994), par. 92. Hereafter CCC.

13 SF 60.

life and emotions of the community."[14] Such a dynamic sense of the faith on the part of the faithful also validates doctrine in its function of expressing the faith of the people. Pope Francis, in *Evangelii Gaudium* writes, "Popular piety enables us to see how the faith, once received, becomes embodied in a culture and is constantly passed on."[15]

Thus, expressions of popular piety, like the devotion to the *Apu* help us understand our relationship with God in concrete ways and allow us to respond concretely to the God who reveals himself to us. As God reveals himself to us through *Apu*, God also allows us to see him revealed in those whom he closely associated with even while he was on earth. In *Apu*, we also see the least of our fellowmen who suffer and are burdened by problems, perhaps even considered dead in the eyes of the world. As God is revealed to us as mercy, we see the reality that we, too, are called to be in a relationship of mercy with others. Thus, we also become aware of the sufferings of others, especially those dear to us, and become willing to suffer with and for them too. This is the Filipino cultural trait called *damayan*.

Damayan is so ingrained in the culture that during the Holy Week, one of the local practices of people in Pampanga is *pamagdarame*, or self-flagellation. While an outsider may see this as an act of reparation for sins, or a medieval practice that survived the modern times, it is not. The term *mandarame,* which is used to refer to self-flagellants, comes from the

14 Pope Benedict XVI, *Letter of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI to Seminarians,* 18 October 2010, https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/letters/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20101018_seminaristi.html (accessed 04 April 2019).

15 Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation on the Joy of the Gospel* Evangelii Gaudium (Pasay City: Paulines Publishing House, 2013), par. 123. Hereafter EG.

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Kapampangan root *dame*, close to the Tagalog *damay*, which connotes being one with another person. Moreover, it also means carrying the burden of another person or "voluntarily taking part in someone else's situation or predicament," which involves "placing one's self in a position of physical discomfort, which would enable one to approximate the burden of someone else's plight."[16] Thus, the *mandarame* is an effort to share in the suffering of Christ on Good Friday, as an act of companionship rather than of penitence. Quite appropriately, these men also walk alongside the bier of the dead Jesus during the Good Friday procession. Moreover, the *mandarame* often perform their rituals as a *pag-damay* in the suffering of an ailing loved one, for whom a *panata*[17] is made. This is an expression of the Filipino sense of "embodied empathy," one which is rooted in local concepts of interiorized personhood or *loob*, and social empathy, "which could not be simply emplotted into Catholic doctrinal or theological framework."[18] One wills to suffer with Christ not out of a desire to atone for one's own sin, but as a response to the pain of a beloved, and a response of gratitude to God who comes to one's aid in love. The practice evokes compassion in the literal sense: to suffer with.

Understood within this framework of *pag-damay*, the devotion to *Apu* also comes across as an experience of God becoming one of us, voluntarily taking part in our predicament. The incarnation is *a pag-damay.* In becoming flesh, God willingly participates in human frailty and powerlessness.

16 Julius Bautista, "The Localization of Roman Catholicism," in *Routeledge Handbook of Religions in Asia,* eds. Bryan Turner and Oscar Salemink (New York: Routledge, 2015), 104.

17 A *panata* is a personal promise or commitment to God to practice a certain ritual in exchange of a grace that one asks for, or in gratitude for a grace received.

18 Bautista, "The Localization of Roman Catholicism," 101.

God who is so close to humanity, as flesh-and-blood, is here depicted to have chosen to be one with humanity even in death. The devotees experience God in *Apu* as someone who is near and within arms' reach, and one who is close enough to be touched and kissed. In *Apu,* God reveals himself as one who takes on our powerlessness out of love for us. In the fullness of his self-emptying in a death which he suffered on account of his becoming one with us, God becomes all the more accessible to us.[19]

God is an accessible God; and in *Apu*, God is revealed as a God who welcomes all, no matter what state of life one is in. A study of Dr. Yabut shows that many of the devotees of *Apu* are from the poor, and people who are generally not accepted in society.[20]He notes, among others, prostitutes (from the outskirts of the nearby Clark Air Base) and snatchers. Bishop David[21] describes most of the people that come to *Apu* as those who keep away from the public eye, and those who feel they are unwelcome in other churches. But here, as God becomes one with them, they too become one with God. With *Apu*, the devotees, as it were,

19 Philippians 2:7

20 Homer Yabut, "*Apu*ng Mamacalulu: Ang Sto. Entierro ng Pampanga," *Dalumat eJournal* 4, 1-2 (2013), dlsu.academia.edu/HomerYabut (accessed 5 March 2019).

21 Pablo Virgilio S. David, "Apung Mamacalulu: A Theology of the Life-Giving Death of God," in *Apung Mamacalulu: The Sto. Entierro of Angeles City,* ed. Nina L.B. Tomen, (Angeles City : Curia Sancti Rosarii, Inc., 2011), 83.

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> become one with the image they touch – one in their quest for healing and wholeness, one in their desire to live anew, one in finding meaning in their sufferings and pains, as their own ways of "filling in their own bodies what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ." (col 1:24) Their trials are made more bearable by the thought of enduring them as a participation in the passion of the Son of God.[22]

The devotional prayer to *Apu* composed by Bishop David[23] reflects the kinds of devotees that come to *Apu*. He describes them as taking to *Apu* all their pains, all their difficulties, and all that burdens them, together with all their needs and those of the people they love. They come to *Apu* with their frail faith, their wavering trust, and their imperfect love. They come to *Apu* in hope that *Apu* would deal with them with mercy as he did when people came to him while he walked the earth. They come to *Apu* because they believe he will help them with their problems as Jesus responded in the Gospels to those who asked for his help. Some come to *Apu* not for themselves, but for their loved ones, as did the friends who broke the roof to get their friend healed by Jesus, and the countless other people who counted on Jesus for healing and strength on behalf of others.

At the outset, the devotion to the *Apu* seems to be a morbid devotion, focused on the dead Christ, as if death and condemnation had the final say. This also seems to discount the fact of the resurrection, and that the Jesus in the sepulcher is the same Jesus resurrected. The experience of devotees, however, say otherwise. Central to the devotion to *Apu* is an experience of salvation, and with it, a sort of resurrection.

22 Ibid., 85

23 A copy of the prayer, both in *Kapampangan* and English is posted within the vicinity of the Shrine.

The devotion's beginning is itself attributed to the miracle of Roman Payumo's being saved from his death sentence after calling on *Apu*. People who come to *Apu* generations after also experience the same salvation, a salvation here-and-now. In *Apu*, God redeems humanity precisely at the current situation they are in; as it were, God meets one where one is. Bishop David writes,

> They come grieving and leave consoled; they come troubled in spirit, and go home in peace. They come burdened by the weight of their own sins and return home feeling forgiven, or at least understood and accepted. They come confused and go back home refreshed and enlightened; they come feeling lost and return home with a new sense of direction. They come ill and go home feeling healed; they come fragmented and come home feeling whole again. They come discouraged and weak, and go home with renewed inner strength. They come fearful and traumatized, and go home reassured. They come with their hurts and resentments, and go home learning to forgive. They come feeling insecure, and go home feeling loved unconditionally.[24]

Thus, devotion to the *Apu* is not just a devotion to a dead deity, but a devotion that leads one towards a resurrection, for the Lord in the holy sepulcher is the same Lord risen and alive. It is this life of the risen Lord that accompanies devotees as they go back to the world, having experienced God's mercy in *Apu.* The devotion flourished out of this experience of salvation.

The fullness of God's revelation in Jesus, and the whole Christ event, clearly gets the message across: God intends not only to save individuals, but to gather a people to himself.

24 David, "Apung Mamacalulu," 86.

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In the devotees' experience of salvation in *Apu*, one can see intimations of the realization of the kingdom on earth, as it is in heaven. New life becomes evident in deeper devotion out of gratitude. In their becoming one with *Apu*, devotees also become one with *Apu* in mercy-ing. They too, become *Taung Mamacalulu*, people who show mercy. Their piety and charity is a fruit of their own *pagdamay* with the Lord who has chosen to take part in their plight. By this, one also sees that devotion to the *Apu* is not only a one-on-one relationship with *Apu*. Rather, as God gathered communities and brought them up as a people, *Apu* also reveals a God who gathers a community of merciful people. The devotion to *Apu* is a concrete way of being Church – a people of God.

Bishop David also relates the story of how devotees would leave amounts of money within the "casket" of the *Apu*, right at his feet and within the reach of other devotees.[25] Despite being provided with donation boxes for the money, people still leave the money where another devotee can help himself with some amount as his turn to pray comes. Bishop David observes how the devotees who put in the money do not seem to mind this at all. He gets the inkling that in the devotee's mind, money that goes to the donation boxes go to the institutional church and it seems that this is not the intention of the donor. They literally leave the money at the feet of the *Apu*, at *Apu*'s disposal for someone in need who might come to *Apu*, as *Apu*'s ready help in their need for *Apu* knows their needs best. Bishop David adds,

25 Ibid.

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> they presuppose, at least culturally, that a thief would normally be afraid to steal from *Apu*. I doubt therefore whether they regard those who help themselves as thieves; I am more inclined to believe that they regard them as beneficiaries of *Apu*'s charity.[26]

Such a participation in the *mercying*, however, comes only as a response to God who reveals himself as merciful through *Apu.* This brings one back to the dynamic of the whole of theology: God initiates the encounter, humanity responds in faith and praxis. In *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Pope Paul VI says that popular piety "manifests a thirst for God which only the poor and the simple can know" and that "it makes people capable of generosity and sacrifice even to the point of heroism, when it is a question of bearing witness to belief."[27] This authentic witness to the truth of Jesus, who is revealed as the *Mercying Lord* in *Apu*, is the *Mercying* Church that has grown around *Apung Mamacalulu*.

In all of these encounters, one looks back to God as the initiator of the encounter, and thus the power behind the praxis as well. As God was and is always the first to reach out to humanity, so too does devotion to *Apu* only become possible if *Apu* has drawn close to them first. Jesus, our healing and forgiving Lord, continues to reach out to each of us, understanding our weaknesses, our failures, our struggles, having been through all of these himself. The purpose of the incarnation was not only so that God could be one with our humanity, but that God could also make himself accessible to man, physically and humanly, in the most intimate way possible. It is not only the people who accompany Jesus and

26 Ibid.
27 Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi,* 48.

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participate in his passion but also Christ who participates and accompanies devotees in their own passion and death, towards their resurrection.

After taking root in the Filipino culture, Christianity has produced many ways of living out the faith. Many, even among the hierarchy, criticize devotion to images, seeing them as bordering on fanaticism or pietism. The uninitiated and the outsider may even construe it as a form of idol worship. However, these images can only be objects of devotion, not in themselves, but as pointers to a reality that they represent. Inspired by God, these symbols of faith express our experience of divine truth in the only way human beings can – by means of sensible and tangible realities. At the same time, these symbols continue to mediate God's presence to us as they continue to point to the divine that they symbolize. Religious images such as *Apu* continue to gather people to God and their neighbors. Thus, these images can become a starting point for a theology of a local church, a theology of simple people. The whole cult of the *Apung Mamacalulu* points to a Christological point of view of a particular people and a particular way of being Church.

In terms of theology and practice, one finds that theology taking on a local flavor works in two directions. First, that the faith of the people correlating with doctrine validates that theology as still expressive of the lived faith-experience of a believing community. Towards the local culture, on the other hand, finding theology concretely assimilated in the culture shows that the faith is alive and is able to take root in that culture, and produce local expressions. Theology, and more pointedly, Christology, remains to be an expression of a people's experience of God. In the Kapampangan experience of *Apung Mamacalulu,* one experiences the same Jesus Christ

who walked the earth and touched the lives of people who healed the sick and reached out to the poor and the outcast. *Apung Mamacalulu* continues to draw people to experience God's mercy through the merciful, life-giving death of Jesus.

Ironically, the dead Christ communicates life eternal, if only we look to Christ beyond the grave. And this, I guess, is the invitation of *Apung Mamacalulu*: to look beyond the grave – our hopelessness and despair – and experience God's life, which continues to keep us going through life's hardships. Beyond contemplating Christ in the tomb, devotees must keep in mind that he did not remain in the tomb. Christ has risen, and by his resurrection, all are given the sure hope of being able to go beyond anything and everything they are going through. The resurrection gives the Church the capacity not to despair because, at the end of it all, suffering, violence, and death will never have the final say. God, who accompanies us, is mercy beyond the grave. God has conquered the grave.

After all the merits of popular piety, Pope Benedict XVI still holds that "certainly popular piety always needs to be purified and refocused, yet it is worthy of our love, and it truly makes us into the 'People of God'."[28] Popular piety continues to be a fertile expression of a simple but profound faith. For the devotees in Angeles City and beyond, it is Jesus as *Apung Mamacalulu*, the *mercying* Lord who accompanies us in our humanity and takes us with him in his resurrection. *Ang Panginoon na dumadamay sa atin sa ating pagka-tao, dinadamay tayo sa muling pagkabuhay, habang tayo ay nagdadamayan sa sakit at pasasalamat.*

28 Pope Benedict XVI, *Letter to Seminarians*, no. 4.

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