Landas 25 (2011) 353–365

REMEMBERING AND REFLECTING ON MY ENCOUNTERS WITH CATALINO ARÉVALO

Theologian, Counsellor and Friend

Georg Evers

When I was asked to contribute to the "Festschrift" honouring Catalino Arévalo, I hesitated at first, but then responded that I could reflect on my encounters with Catalino Arévalo, in the Philippines and in different places in Asia, in the context of seminars and conferences of the FABC, especially the Theological Advisory Commission (TAC), today called the Office of Theological Concerns (OTC). What I present in the following, therefore, is not meant to be a theological assessment of the various contributions Catalino Arévalo has made to the development of a Filipino theology and even more to the theology of the FABC. After all, it would be preposterous if I would pretend to be in a position to do justice to such a task. I hope that in the future some young theologian, looking for a potential subject for his theological dissertation, will take up this challenge to retrace and evaluate the contributions Catalino Arévalo has made to Asian and Filipino theology. My contribution for the "Festschrift" is more modest. I have had the privilege of meeting Catalino Arévalo again and again, when visiting the Philippines and often during conferences of the FABC. What impressed me during these encounters was that Catalino Arévalo was a bridge-builder, always intent on bringing people and ideas into interplay. On the one hand, his interest was to develop a genuine Asian and Filipino theology by relying on Asian resources,

https://publications.lst.edu/

but at the same time, he was convinced that the Catholicity of the Church called for cooperation with other theological strands to ensure continuity and unity. It was this balance between openness to new forms of an indigenous theology and the awareness of safeguarding the age-old traditions of the Church which gave him the stature of a pioneer and something of a Church father at the same time. My own understanding of Asian theology and the role of Asian theologians has been shaped very much by my encounters with him.

To understand why I, as a German theologian, became interested in the theological developments within the Asian Churches, it will be helpful to supply some biographical data. My own connection with and affection for Asian theology go back to my formative years in Japan during the 1960s. After having finished three years of studying scholastic philosophy in Pullach near Munich, which in the pre-Vatican II days was taught in Latin, I was sent by my Jesuit superiors to Japan in 1962 to continue my training as a future missionary in that country. The contact with Japanese culture, history and religious traditions in the Japanese language school was, on the one hand, something of a cultural shock for me, but at the time an eye-opener to a new fascinating culture and to a new way of living and seeing the world. The four-year course in theology at the Sophia University during the sessions of Vatican II, however, was something counter-productive because our professors were still using the old text-books and teaching us a theology which surely was sound and orthodox but lacking any reference to Japan or Asia for that matter. In retrospect, it is surprising to me that the theology we were taught at the time did not reflect on the mission of the Church and on the potential contribution Christianity could make towards present-day Japanese society. Given the fact that Christianity is only a tiny minority in Japan, there should have been an awareness that future priests and missionaries had to be taught about the needs, the method and the aim of presenting the Gospel in the context of Japan. But in the curriculum of the faculty of theology at Sophia University, no course in missiology was offered at the time. The same was true with regard to the problem of the encounter of Christianity with Japanese culture and religions. As regards interreligious dialogue, there were the contributions by the two Jesuits, Heinrich Dumoulin

https://publications.lst.edu/

(1905–1995) and Hugo Enomiya-Lassalle (1898–1990), who have made great contributions in the field of Buddhist-Christian dialogue. The insights they had gained in their encounter with the history and the practice of Zen-Buddhism, however, were not taken up by the professional theologians at the faculty of theology at Sophia University. The same was true for the work of the Catholic novelist Endo Shusaku (1923–1996) who in his historical novels had dealt with the mission history and the persecutions of Christians in Japan. Endo described how the foreign missionaries to Japan experienced the alienness of Japanese culture and society, and how the Japanese, who became Christians, had to struggle with their divided loyalties towards traditional Japanese culture on the one hand, and towards a Christian faith which they experienced as alien and separating them from their own roots on the other. For Endo, these reflections were set in the past, but they were at the same time also problems which were haunting him as a Catholic in his own life. Endo struggled all his life with the problem of how to combine being a Japanese with being a Catholic. Looking at the state of the Japanese Church, Endo was convinced that the task of inculturating Christianity within Japanese culture and society had not even begun. It was somewhat tragic that the contribution Endo had made in his capacity as a novelist was not taken up by the theological establishment in Japan as a challenge to reflect on the theological and missiological implications it contained.

As theological students we reacted to the unsatisfactory situation at the theological faculty at Sophia University, and the irrelevance of much of what was taught in the official lectures, by organising our own theological study circles. Among the students at the time was also the present General Superior of the Jesuits, Adolfo Nicolas. Responding to the new developments in ecumenism in the follow-up of Vatican II, we formed ecumenical groups with theological students from the other Christian Churches and denominations. At the same time, we made contact with members of other religions, such as monks of the Zen tradition and with representatives of the many New Religious Movements in Japan. Some of these activities were the summer camps which were organised by Protestant pastors working in the field of industrial labour with the trade unions of Japan. These four-

https://publications.lst.edu/

week long work seminars brought together theology students from different Christian denominations. The participants were living, eating, discussing, and praying together, and during the day worked in different factories as "working-students" for eight hours. This gave us the opportunity to experience the usual working conditions of Japanese factory workers. During the evenings, talks were given by pastors working in the field of social action, by trade union members and others to provide us with background information about the working and living conditions of industrial workers in Japan. These exposure programs were a learning process for all theology students because they gave us the chance to encounter the realities of Japanese workers' lives. For myself, taking part twice in the project of the work seminars made me realize that the missionary approach followed in the Catholic Church—obliging potential catechumens to take part in a two-year study program of Christian doctrine—was by no means suitable to the life situations of Japanese workers. How could one expect that after a full day of heavy work, these workers would be profiting from studying a catechism which presented them with a small compendium of the totality of Christian doctrines? To be presented with answers to questions which they had never raised, and which did not really touch on their life situations, was obviously not the right way to invite an average Japanese to let himself be baptised and join the Church. The exposure to the lives of Japanese workers showed me the deficiencies of the common catechetical approach followed in Japan at the time.

After seven years in Japan, I went back to my country of origin to do a doctorate in theology at the University of Münster under the guidance of Karl Rahner. My dissertation dealt with the contribution of Vatican II to mission theology, the theology of religions and the theology of the world. This gave me the opportunity to study in depth the conciliar documents in their various stages of development and their theological background. The conclusion of my work was that the formulation of a mission theology valid for the whole Church in any given situation was not possible anymore. The new insights of Vatican II were that the Christian message had to be presented everywhere by taking into account the "signs of the times" in reacting to the various cultural, religious and sociological contexts. The concrete forms of

https://publications.lst.edu/

how to present the Christian message in any given context, therefore, will be varying from context to context which has the consequence that a formulation of only one form of mission theology for all given contexts was no longer possible. This insight prepared me for my work with the Institute of Missiology Missio in Aachen a few years later. Before this, however, I spent seven years working at an institution in Germany dealing with Christian ecumenism, and at the same time, with Christian-Jewish and Christian-Muslim dialogue, and also with "Jewish-Christian-Muslim" trialogue. The dialogue with the members of the Abrahamite family was a good introduction into the practice of interreligious dialogue which is so important for the Asian Churches.

From 1979 until 2001, I worked at the Institute of Missiology Missio in Aachen on the Asian desk, and was responsible for editing the bibliographical guide "Theology in Context," which twice a year provided an overview of theological journals, books and study conferences in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Oceania. The Institute of Missiology was founded after Vatican II by Wilhelm Wissing, then president of Missio in Aachen, as a funding agency providing scholarships for future teachers in seminaries and universities and as an agent to support research, conferences and publications in the Churches in the Third World. The other aim of the Institute of Missiology was to function as a bridge to present the new insights of the different contextual theologies, which were developing in the Asian, African and Latin American Churches, to theologians in Europe and North America. As a German institution, our primary targets were the German speaking theologians. Therefore, the Institute of Missiology started with a book series *Theologie der Dritten Welt* (Theology of the Third World) which presented in German translations selected contributions from theologians from the Third World. The first volume in this series was entitled *Den Glauben neu verstehen. Beiträge zu einer asiatischen Theologie* (A New Understanding of the Faith: Contributions towards an Asian Theology). In this volume, the contributions of an international conference on the theme of "Contextual Theology," held in June 1978 in Manila, were collected, which brought together for the first time Catholic theologians from various Asian countries. Participants were Catalino Arévalo and Efrem Rivera from the

https://publications.lst.edu/

Philippines, Aloysius B. Chang from Taiwan, Robert Hardawiryana from Indonesia, Wendy Flannery from Papua New Guinea, and Ernest Piryns from Japan. The very first contribution in this volume is by Catalino Arévalo who addressed himself to the fundamental problem of the conference: "What is Contextual Theology?" Arévalo is introduced in the volume as

> Professor of dogmatic theology at the Loyola School of Theology at Ateneo University in Manila, as coordinator of the Commission on Catholic Doctrine of the Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, as member of the Papal International Theological Commission and as editor of the *Loyola Papers*.

In his contribution, Catalino Arévalo describes how a theology of the "signs of the times" should be at the centre of the various attempts to develop new contextual theologies. When he outlines the characteristics of such a way of doing theology, he indirectly seems to describe his own theological stance when he states that a contextual theology responding to the signs of the times will look for God's acting in history by avoiding any form of ideology, be it of the "status quo" or of revolutionary fervour. This kind of balanced approach, which in contact with the word of God seeks to use the eyes of faith when doing theology and which tries to be in harmony, as far as possible, with the faith of the whole Christian community, is typical for Catalino Arévalo's approach to theology.

Catalino Arévalo had studied theology at Weston College in the USA and done his theological dissertation at the Gregorian University in Rome in the pre-Vatican II days. The change from Scholastic theology, which he had considered to be something of an "absolute system," to the new insights brought about by Vatican II were for him, as he told me in an interview many years later, "a real crisis." At the same time, Vatican II meant a new beginning for the whole Catholic Church and especially for theology. When in 1965 the Jesuit School of Theology, later named Loyola School of Theology, was founded, Catalino Arévalo became the first founding dean. Later he was sent abroad to the USA and Europe to gather information about the new theological developments. After his return, he started to work on the project which became his life work, to

https://publications.lst.edu/

develop an indigenous and contextual theology in the Philippines and beyond in the Asian Churches. Catalino Arévalo was one of the first theologians in the Philippines to react to the new current in contextual theology developed in Latin America, called liberation theology, which put the emphasis on social analysis and the fundamental option for the poor. After a six-week visit in Latin America in 1970 where he met Juan Luis Segundo and Gustavo Gutiérrez, the founding father of liberation theology, Catalino Arévalo experienced something which he described as a "qualitative jump" in his theological thinking, but which at the same time was a liberating experience accompanying him ever afterwards. But at the same time, he never became an uncritical follower of liberation theology and always kept a critical distance from forms of liberation theology advanced by overly enthusiastic proponents of a revolutionary and Marxist inspired theology. The same critical approach Catalino Arévalo took when, in 1981 in Daressalam, the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) was founded. Unlike his confrere Carlos Abesamis, who was one of the initiators of the Filipino branch of EATWOT, Catalino Arévalo himself never became a member of EATWOT. The EATWOT-theologians were distancing themselves from the traditional Western theology which in their eyes was no longer relevant and not capable of answering the challenges theologians in the Third World were facing in their attempts to respond to the problems of massive poverty and exploitation in their countries. As Gustavo Gutiérrez, the founding father of Latin American liberation theology, formulated, the content of contemporary theology in the context of the Third World could no longer be finding answers to abstract metaphysical problems, such as the question whether God exists, but to respond to the questions of the poor, who were faced with existential problems of finding food and shelter. The task of the theologians, therefore, was to analyse the situation of the poor and to understand the sociological, economic and political mechanisms of exploitation and suppression the poor were faced with. In close contact with the grass-roots, the theologians should then develop their theological insights in living the fundamental option for the poor.

The often aggressive formulations used by some EATWOT-theologians to describe their new way of doing theology from the grass-

https://publications.lst.edu/

roots, by distancing themselves from the traditional Western theology and positions of the magisterium of the Church, were not resonant with Catalino Arévalo's way of thinking and his understanding of being a theologian who tried to keep a balance between being open to change and new insights, but at the same time preserving a bond with tradition and the magisterium within the hierarchical church. Catalino Arévalo was aware that this type of theology was of great importance for his native country the Philippines, which under the military dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos was experiencing social turmoil and violence of various kinds. Within the Catholic Church in the Philippines, there was a fierce debate about the question whether the use of force could be justified when fighting for justice and the rights of the poor against a government which was violating human rights on a grand scale. When faced with the challenges of Latin American theology, which was heavily influencing many theologians and social activists in the Philippines during the time of martial law under President Ferdinand Marcos, Catalino Arévalo remained true to this position of staying with the Church's teaching on non-violence and to work with those groups which remained united with the bishops.

My first personal meeting with Catalino Arévalo was during the time of martial law at the East Asian Pastoral Institute (EAPI) on the premises of Ateneo University. Adolfo Nicolas, then rector of the EAPI, had organised this encounter. I remember that Catalino Arévalo had just returned from the country side, after having given a retreat to sisters working in an area where there were armed clashes between government troops and revolutionaries. My first impression of him was that he was very exhausted and really worn out. When I started questioning him about his position towards liberation theology and his stance on the problem of the legitimacy of using violence in fighting injustice and the violation of human rights, he was not willing to enter into an academic discussion, but referred to a raw experience he just had at the convent of the nuns where he gave his retreat. The question, the mother superior of the convent had put to him, he addressed to me, and asked: "What do you answer, when you are asked by a mother superior, what she should do, when she discovers that one of her nuns is hiding guns, destined for the revolutionaries,

https://publications.lst.edu/

under her bed?" I do not recall how I tried to react to this question, but I began to understand what kind of context Catalino Arévalo and other theologians in the Philippines were facing, and that to respond to these challenges could only be done by developing a new type of contextual theology, quite different from the academic way of doing theology at universities in the West.

Since the Institute of Missiology was editing the series *Theology of the Third World*, we were always on the look-out for potential contributions when we were travelling abroad. Several times, I have tried to convince Catalino Arévalo to put together some of the many articles and research papers he had written in his many assignments, so that we could gather them into a book manuscript, translate them into German and publish them in our series. This approach had worked with his fellow Jesuit, Aloysius Pieris from Sri Lanka, whom we had assisted in collecting articles, which then were published in two volumes: *An Asian Theology of Liberation* and *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism*, both of which were published first in German by our Institute, and only later in an English edition by Maryknoll Press. This approach, however, did not work with Catalino Arévalo. Whenever I brought up the request that we would like to publish some of his writings in our series, his response was negative. As he himself explained in the interview I was privileged to do with him in 1995 for our journal "Yearbook of Contextual Theologies," he stated that in contrast to seminary professors who were doing "book theology," he was a theologian who was constantly asked to speak at grassroots seminars and workshops, regional meetings of religious priests and laypeople, meetings of religious superiors and the like, and challenged to respond to the actual, ever changing practical problems of everyday life in the Philippines and in Asia from the standpoint of faith. He concluded that this was the reason why, in 30 years of being an active theologian, he never had the time to write a single book by himself. In my travel notes, which I consulted in preparing this contribution, I found a notice about a meeting I had with Catalino Arévalo during a conference of the TAC, in which I had asked him again whether he would be willing to prepare some of his papers for a possible book publication in our series *Theology of the Third World*. His answer to my request was

https://publications.lst.edu/

that he was unable to comply because he did not want to publish his own theological insights because they might stir some controversies, and thus jeopardize his work as ghost-writer for Cardinal Jaime Sin, other bishops, and for publications of the FABC to provide position papers and manuscripts for talks and pastoral letters. He considered this service to be his contribution to the Philippine Church, because it gave him the opportunity to ensure that the more conservative theologians would not determine the course of the Church in the Philippines. Catalino Arévalo was content that many of his ideas were published after all, if not under his name, then under the prestigious names of bishops or as publications of the FABC.

From the first meeting of Asian Bishops in Manila 1970 onwards, Catalino Arévalo had been member of many drafting committees of General Assemblies and the conferences of the various Bishops' Institutes for Social Actions (BISA), missionary activities (BIMA) and interreligious dialogue (BIRA). It would be interesting to find out how the formulation of the triple dialogue came about. This succinct way of describing the task of the Asian Churches as a threefold task of entering into a dialogue with the cultures in inculturation, of engaging in dialogue with the religious traditions in interreligious dialogue, and of dealing with poverty in the fundamental option for the poor has become a hallmark for the FABC. Catalino Arévalo was for sure one of the co-authors of this formula, and ever since has defended it against objections that it had become obsolete by steadfastly pointing out that these three dialogues were still a challenge and an unfinished agenda for the Asian Churches. It is significant for his understanding of the role of theologian in the context of the Philippines and Asian Churches that he never complained not to have been able to develop his own theological insights more at length. Catalino Arévalo was content to be at the service of the Church and to respond to the constant demands made of him and his expertise in theological, ecclesial and spiritual questions.

This disposition to stay in the background and not to seek the limelight for himself made him the ideal animator to advance new ideas and launch activities within the Church in the Philippines and quite often within the FABC. When in 1982 Fr. Amalorpavadass advanced

https://publications.lst.edu/

the idea to set up a forum of Asian theologians within the FABC, to stimulate exchange among Asian theologians and to be of assistance to the Asian bishops, Catalino Arévalo was asked to be the convenor of the preliminary meeting, which was held in 1985, and during which the Theological Advisory Committee (TAC) within the FABC was founded. The first meeting of TAC, held in Hong Kong in 1986, which dealt with the questions of interreligious dialogue and the theology of the Local Church, was also led by Catalino Arévalo. During my visit to the Philippines in October 1986, a few months after the EDSA People Power Revolution, I was invited to have a meeting with the members of the faculty of Loyola School of Theology. The invitation for the meeting had come from Catalino Arévalo. In the discussion, Catalino Arévalo advanced the idea to set up a permanent centre for theological research for the member Churches of the FABC. He was thinking of a permanent office, something parallel to what the Protestant Churches in the CCA had realized in Singapore with the Office of Theological Concern (OTC), with some theologians as permanent staff. As venue for a similar institution of the FABC, Arévalo envisaged to choose also Singapore, because that would be a contribution towards an ecumenical sharing in the field of theology in Asia. The expectation, he expressed at the time, that Missio, especially the Institute of Missiology, could and would take the initiative, however, was in contrast with the way Missio was operating, which as a foreign funding agency could have supported such a venture financially, but could not act as initiator. Only the bishops in the central committee would have been in a position to entrust the task of setting up such permanent centre to Fr. Ed Malone, then the Assistant Secretary General of the FABC in Hong Kong. Eventually, the idea advanced by Catalino Arévalo did not materialize. But it shows how Catalino Arévalo was thinking ahead and beyond the national borders to foster theological cooperation within the Asian Churches. It was not personal ambition to advance his own career, but a genuine desire to create conditions which could bring the various theological enterprises within the Asian Churches into greater cooperation.

It was a kind of coincidence that at the same time when the Theological Advisory Commission was dealing with the problem of the local church, the Institute of Missiology in Aachen was just in the

https://publications.lst.edu/

process of preparing a bibliography on the same topic, as a supplement to our bibliographical journal *Theology in Context*. When I mentioned our project to Catalino Arévalo, he invited me spontaneously to come to the next conference of the Theological Advisory Commission, which was scheduled to be held in April 1987 and which was focusing on the theology of the local church. Catalino Arévalo himself was very much interested in this topic, and making use of his own experiences as theologian in the service of the local church of the Philippines, was able to contribute valuable ideas. But also on this occasion, he was not just relying on his own experience and expertise, but had provided that the Theological Advisory Commission make use of the expertise of Fr. Carolus Putranta who had just finished in Rome a thesis on the theology of the local church within the FABC, and of the theological qualification of Fr. John Komonchak from the Catholic University in Washington, USA, whom he had invited as foreign resource person. It was during this conference in Singapore, and later during several other conferences of the TAC and the FABC, that I could observe how Catalino Arévalo was operating as a theologian who was not seeking the limelight, but who was following closely the debates and who had a special gift of summing up succinctly what had been said. At the same time, he has a critical mind and does not shy away from stating his point clearly. That was, for example, the case when, at the "First International Theological Colloquium" held in Pattaya in 1994, Catalino Arévalo responded to Felix Wilfred's assertion that the concept of inculturation had become "a spent force." Catalino Arévalo objected and insisted that the work of inculturation had not yet been finished and still was to be kept on the theological agenda within the FABC. In other controversial theological discussions, such as the role of Jesus Christ as a historical person and the need to proclaim the Gospel also in the context of interreligious dialogue, Catalino Arévalo insisted on the validity of traditional positions in a firm but gentle way. He made use of his position that, as a senior theologian, he was probably not called to be a pioneer advancing new ideas, but that he felt the obligation to ensure that the Asian theologians were doing their work within the Church and in contact and agreement with the bishops.

https://publications.lst.edu/

Let me finish on a personal note. I have had the privilege to have met Catalino Arévalo on different occasions. One memory is of a visit to Imus, Cavite, where he took me to meet the parents of Luis Tagle, now the Bishop of Imus, Cavite,* who then was studying in the USA with a scholarship of our Institute. It was on a Sunday, when in Imus the annual fiesta was held. It was for me an opportunity to see something of what I would call the "paternal side" of a theologian who was keen on helping young priests to advance in their formation. It is this spiritual side of the theologian which has made Catalino Arévalo such a valuable counsellor for so many people of different backgrounds. I experienced this myself when I informed Catalino Arévalo of the loss of our son Markus, and he responded with understanding and compassion which gave us strength and consolation. Especially grateful I am for the trust he showed me when I asked him for an interview about his life and work for our publication "Yearbook of Contextual Theologies." During this interview, which lasted several hours, I had the unique opportunity to experience Catalino Arévalo's amazing memory, to accompany him in his remembering the different stages of his full life, and to be impressed by the modesty he displayed when talking about himself. When he recounted of how often he was called to do things for others, to facilitate and to give counsel, there were traces of regret not to have been able to fulfil his own plans and to concentrate more on the theological topics he would have liked to expand and to deepen. But there was no resignation, but rather gratefulness to have been able to be of service to others.

*Sometime after this article was written, Bishop Tagle was named Archbishop of Manila and, later, Cardinal of Manila.

https://publications.lst.edu/