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DISCOVERING THE RICH TREASURES OF POPULAR PIETY

Theological-Pastoral-Missiological Insights

James H. Kroeger, M.M.

In the contemporary experience of missionaries, catechists, preachers, and liturgists, the task of evangelization is immensely enriched by drawing upon the insights and rituals of popular religiosity. In diverse cultural milieus, pastoral agents are discovering that their task of announcing the Gospel is facilitated and enhanced through the creative use of popular ritual and dramatics. In a word, folk religious practices, diversely termed "popular religiosity," "popular piety," and "popular spirituality," are a resource for evangelization awaiting full exploration; Pope Francis would wholeheartedly agree!

Often culturally unique, local traditions and pageants can creatively portray core themes of Christianity and biblical faith. Such inculturated proclamation originates in the encounter of life and faith, and is then manifested through the pageantry and festivity of popular religiosity. This approach to liturgy and evangelization enables communities to artistically portray and celebrate their lived Christian identity.

Moreover, lively expressions of a community's faith-life need not raise undue anxieties about dogmatic orthodoxy or faithfulness to biblical texts. On the contrary, popular forms of piety should be welcomed as tools of evangelization because dramatics, pageantry, socio-religious rituals, and festivity can often constitute, in themselves, an actual proclamation of biblical faith!

In *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Pope Paul VI's famous exhortation on evangelization in the modern world, a lengthy section is devoted to the role that popular piety should play in announcing the Good News. While noting its possible limitations, the pope asserted that

> if it is well oriented, above all by a pedagogy of evangelization, it is rich in values; … one must be sensitive to it, know how to perceive its interior dimensions and undeniable values…. When it is well oriented, this popular religiosity can be more and more for multitudes of our peoples a true encounter with God in Jesus Christ.[1]

Employing the traditional question-and-answer catechetical approach, this piece will explore some basic questions about popular devotional practices. The authenticity of popular piety, its role in the spiritual life of Catholics, and its employment in the promotion of the faith will be explored through a brief and focused discussion on some important aspects of this worldwide phenomenon.

1. What is a common understanding of "popular piety," "popular religiosity," or "traditional devotional practices"? Perhaps the most complete and authoritative resource for understanding the many dimensions of this subject is the *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines*. This truly helpful document was issued by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments in 2001, and reaches to well over two hundred pages. Here one reads that "popular piety" designates "those diverse cultic expressions of a private or community nature" which derive "from a particular nation or people or from their culture."[2] They are manifested in a wide variety of external practices such as "prayers, hymns, observances attached to particular times or places, [use of] insignia [and] medals, habits or customs"; they emerge from "an attitude of

[1]Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 48.

[2]Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines* (Vatican City: December 2001), 9.

faith" and manifest a "particular relationship of the faithful with the Divine Persons, or the Blessed Virgin Mary … or with the Saints."[3]

The document goes on to explain additional aspects of popular piety: gestures, texts and formulae, song and music, sacred images, sacred places, and sacred times.[4] Several common examples illustrate the importance and impact of popular pious devotions: stations of the cross (*via crucis*), praying of the Rosary, novenas, litanies, and even lyrical children's prayers. Indeed, the Church's popular devotions are extensive, diverse, and multifaceted; above all else, they are a rich treasure to be preserved and propagated!

2. Did the Second Vatican Council discuss "popular piety"? This subject was addressed by the Council in several documents. The document on the liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*) noted:

> The spiritual life, however, is not limited solely to participation in the liturgy. The Christian is indeed called to pray with his brothers and sisters, but he must also enter into his chamber to pray to the Father in secret … he should pray without ceasing.… Popular devotions of the Christian people are to be highly commended, provided they accord with the laws and norms of the Church…. Devotions proper to individual Churches also have a special dignity….[5]

The Decree on Priestly Formation (*Optatam Totius*) asserted: "'Those practices of piety that are commended by the long usage of the Church should be zealously cultivated" among those preparing for ordained ministry in the Church.[6] In the Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*), one finds a clear encouragement that priests develop a strong Eucharistic spiritual life; this certainly includes the Eucharist itself, but also includes "the daily colloquy

[3] *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines*, 8.

[4] *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines*, 15–20.

[5] *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 12–13.

[6] *Optatam Totius* 8.

with Christ, a visit to and veneration of the Most Holy Eucharist."[7] In a word, Vatican II recommended practices of traditional piety, but also indicated some conditions that would guarantee their legitimacy and validity.

3. Have recent popes spoken about "popular religiosity"? Paul VI devoted an entire section[8] of *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, the *magna carta* of contemporary evangelization, to popular piety. He noted that one finds among Catholics "particular expressions of the search for God and for faith [that] were for a long time regarded as less pure and were sometimes despised, but [which today are] almost everywhere being rediscovered." As noted earlier, Paul VI saw the value of popular piety and that it "can be more and more for multitudes of our people a true encounter with God in Jesus Christ."[9]

Paul VI also gifted the Church with the apostolic exhortation *Marialis Cultus,* a 1974 document that focused on "The Right Ordering and Development of Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary." The intention of the pope was to shape and guide the Church's devotion (including popular piety) to the Blessed Virgin in light of the theological, liturgical, spiritual, and pastoral renewal promoted by the Second Vatican Council. The document also underscored the proper relation of popular devotions to the liturgy and the ecumenical dimensions of Marian devotion, as well as the necessary connection of such devotions with the promotion of social justice, eloquently expressed in Mary's prayer, the *Magnificat.*

Saint Pope John Paul II has spoken positively about popular religiosity:

> Popular piety is an expression of faith which avails of certain cultural elements proper to a specific environment…. Genuine forms of popular piety, expressed in a multitude of different ways, derive from the faith, and therefore, must be valued and promoted. Such authentic

[7] *Presbyterorum Ordinis* 18.

[8] *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 48.

[9] *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 48.

> expressions of popular piety are not at odds with the centrality of the Sacred Liturgy. Rather, in promoting the faith of the people, who regard popular piety as a natural religious expression, they predispose the people for the celebration of the Sacred Mysteries.[10]

Pope Benedict XVI, when he addressed the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean on May 13, 2007 at the shrine of Aparecida in Brazil, spoke of "the rich and profound popular religiosity, in which we see the soul of the Latin American peoples." This faith emerges as "a synthesis between their cultures and the Christian faith"; it is marked by "love for the suffering Christ, the God of compassion, pardon and reconciliation … the God who is close to the poor and to those who suffer." Here one finds a "profound devotion to the most holy Virgin of Guadalupe, the *Aparecida*, the Virgin invoked under various national and local titles."[11]

Benedict continued:

> This religiosity is also expressed in devotion to the saints with their patronal feasts, in love for the Pope and the other Pastors, and in love for the Universal Church as the great family of God…. All this forms the great mosaic of popular piety which is the precious treasure of the Catholic Church in Latin America, and must be protected, promoted and, when necessary, purified.[12]

Francis has spoken and written extensively about popular piety, both as Archbishop of Buenos Aires and as Pope. His thought will be highlighted in some later sections of this presentation.

4. What are some values found in popular or folk religiosity? Paul VI eloquently noted the values of popular religiosity:

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[10]John Paul II, address to the plenary assembly of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments (September 20 2001).

[11]Benedict XVI, homily for the inauguration of the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean (Aparecida, Brazil: May 13, 2007).

[12]Benedict XVI, homily for the inauguration of the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean.

> It manifests a thirst for God which only the simple and poor can know. It makes people capable of generosity and sacrifice even to the point of heroism, when it is a question of manifesting belief. It involves an acute awareness of profound attributes of God: fatherhood, providence, loving and constant presence. It engenders interior attitudes rarely observed to the same degree elsewhere: patience, the sense of the Cross in daily life, detachment, openness to others, devotion. By reason of these aspects, we readily call it "popular piety," that is, religion of the people.[13]

Speaking to a group of pilgrims, John Paul II asserted that popular piety is a form of evangelization; he noted:

> I earnestly hope that these significant forms of popular piety, which sprung from faith-filled communities[,] will continue today to be effective tools of evangelization. May they serve as an encouragement to prayer and contemplation, and instill, especially in young people, the same spiritual enthusiasm as in past generations.[14]

Addressing a group of American bishops in similar fashion, the pope affirmed that authentic popular piety can build the faith:

> Another great gift that divine grace brought to life in America is popular piety, deeply rooted in the different nations. This particular characteristic of the American people, when correctly guided, purified and enriched by genuine elements of Catholic doctrine, can become a useful instrument to help the faithful deal appropriately with the challenges of secularization.[15]

5. Have the Philippine bishops written about popular religiosity? The official *National Catechetical Directory for the Philippines* (NCDP), which bears the title *Maturing in Christian Faith*, observes:

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[13]*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 48.

[14]John Paul II, Angelus message (June 27, 1999). Available at https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/angelus/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_ang_19990627.html.

[15]John Paul II, address to participants at the Ninth Meeting of the Post-Synodal Council of the General Secretariat for the Special Assembly for America of the Synod of Bishops (November 5, 2004).

> With the introduction of "Hispanic Christianity" by the early Spanish missionaries into an already existing indigenous belief system, the beginning of what is called today "folk" or "popular Catholicism" was initiated … this popular religiosity still remains strong [among Filipino Catholics].[16]

> Traces of veneration of dead ancestors—apparently a pre-Christian Filipino practice—can still be found today. Catholic devotion to the souls in purgatory, and the celebration of All Saints and All Souls Days, has tended to reinforce these beliefs at times. Perhaps the most characteristic aspect of Filipino popular religiosity … is devotion to saints. This fits in well with the Filipino's natural attraction for the concrete as well as for mediators…. The value of devotion to the saints remains high, but the catechetical effort must lead it to a more direct link with Christ, the source and goal of each saint's life.[17]

The same affirmation of folk religiosity "can be made of the traditional Filipino devotion to Mary, which is grounded in Filipino Catholicism's Hispanic roots, as well as in Filipino society's esteem and respect for women, especially mothers—itself a cultural trait fostered and deepened by the Christian Faith." There are many "common titles under which Mary is venerated: Our Lady of the Rosary, Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, Our Lady of Perpetual Help, of Lourdes, of Mount Carmel, of Sorrows, etc. Mary plays an important role in both Christmas and Holy Week festivities."[18]

The Philippine bishops, while noting the positive elements of popular religion, also assert that there is a need for "evaluating popular religiosity" and "attempting various purifications." This renewal process is necessary because "practices that are good in themselves" are sometimes "no longer responsive to the new social, cultural, or even economic status of the people." In short, "popular religiosity is

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[16]*Maturing in Christian Faith: National Catechetical Directory for the Philippines* (Pasay City: Daughters of St. Paul: 1984), 36.

[17]*Maturing in Christian Faith: National Catechetical Directory for the Philippines*, 40.

[18]*Maturing in Christian Faith: National Catechetical Directory for the Philippines*, 43.

to be developed into authentic mature Filipino Christian living."[19] An excellent example of the renewal of popular religiosity can be found in *Ang Mahal na Birhen: Mary in Philippine Life Today*, the 1975 pastoral letter of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines.

6. Have episcopal bodies from other parts of the world spoken about popular piety? Perhaps the most extensive positive presentation of popular religiosity in recent years is found in the concluding document of the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean held in Aparecida, Brazil in 2007. Two paragraphs (263–264) of the lengthy document express well the profound thought of the assembled bishops.

> We cannot deprecate popular spirituality, or consider it a secondary mode of Christian life, for that would be to forget the primacy of the action of the Spirit and God's free initiative of love. Popular piety contains and expresses a powerful sense of transcendence, a spontaneous ability to find support in God and a true experience of theological love. It is also an expression of supernatural wisdom, because the wisdom of love does not depend directly on the enlightenment of the mind, but on the internal action of grace. That is why we call it popular spirituality, that is, a Christian spirituality which, while it is a personal encounter with the Lord, includes much of the bodily, the perceptible, the symbolic, and people's most concrete needs. It is a spirituality incarnated in the culture of the lowly, which is not thereby less spiritual, but is so in another manner.
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> Popular spirituality is a legitimate way of living the faith, a way of feeling part of the Church and a manner of being missionaries, where the deepest vibrations of America's depths come together. It is part of a "cultural historic originality" of the poor of this continent, and fruit of a "synthesis between their cultures and the Christian faith." In the environment of secularization experienced by our peoples, it is still a powerful confession of the living God who acts in history, and a channel for handing on the faith. Journeying together to shrines and taking part in other manifestations of popular piety, also taking one's children or inviting others, is in itself an evangelizing gesture by

[19] *Maturing in Christian Faith: National Catechetical Directory for the Philippines*, 45.

> which the Christian people evangelizes itself and fulfills the Church's missionary calling.[20]

7. How can customary popular religiosity be renewed? To respond to this important question, one could draw an example from the traditional devotion to the Sacred Heart. The Church dedicates the month of June to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. In addition, many Catholics are familiar with the "First Friday" tradition of receiving the Eucharist for nine consecutive months. This custom originated in the promise that Christ is alleged to have made in a private revelation to Margaret Mary Alacoque (1647–1690), a French Visitation nun. She asserted that those keeping the First Fridays would not die in sin or without the sacraments, that Christ would be their refuge at the hour of death.

How can such a devotion, which could often be limited to a personal, private practice, be renewed and become relevant today? One could look back to the original symbol that was manifested to Margaret Mary: *a heart afire with love for humanity that was surmounted by a cross.* This symbol clearly implies that devotion to the Sacred Heart is intimately connected with the Paschal Mystery: the mystery of Jesus' dying and rising again. In a word, it means that the Sacred Heart calls the Christian to a self-sacrificing love for one's neighbor, a committed and concerned love that is ready to face the challenges of genuinely loving social service.

Our hearts must be transformed into loving replicas of the Heart of Jesus, who reached out to the lost, lonely, little, least, and last in society. Thus, in contemporary society, devotees of the Sacred Heart are called upon to concretize their love in the face of challenging social realities. As Antonio Lambino has written,

> today, much more than in earlier times, serving the poor and the disadvantaged involves intelligent effort to change unjust structures in society…. To be holy means to fight what is inhuman, unChristian

[20]Concluding document of the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean (Aparecida, Brazil: May 13–31, 2007), paragraphs 263–264.

> and sinful in public life and to work generously to make public life more human, more Christian, and more abounding in grace. This could be for many of us a revolutionary change in the idea of holiness and Christian spirituality.[21]

Linking the Sacred Heart devotion with growth in heartfelt compassion for the needy would thus contribute significantly to the renewal of this traditional popular devotion, making it more responsive to contemporary societal realities.

8. How are popular devotions related to the Bible? The Bible stands at the core of God's revelation to the Church. Thus, genuine popular devotions should naturally be strongly linked with biblical themes and imagery. Paul VI noted: "Today it is recognized as a general need of Christian piety that every form of worship should have a biblical imprint."[22] The pope applied this principle to Marian devotions: "What is needed is that texts of prayers and chants should draw their inspiration and wording from the Bible, and above all, that devotion to the Virgin should be imbued with the great themes of the Christian message."[23]

In speaking of the Rosary, John Paul II emphasized that it is not a substitute for the reading of the Bible: "on the contrary, it presupposes and promotes" prayerful reading of the Holy Scriptures. While the mysteries of the Rosary "do no more than outline the fundamental elements of the life of Christ, they easily draw the mind to a more expansive reflection on the rest of the Gospel, especially when the rosary is prayed in a setting of prolonged recollection."[24]

The previous section presented the devotion to the Sacred Heart. The deepening and renewal of this devotion can readily be linked with the Scriptures—one could validly recall the parable of the Good

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[21] Antonio B. Lambino, "Modern Man and the Devotion to the Sacred Heart," *Philippine Priests' Forum* 7:3 (1975): 70.

[22] Paul VI, *Marialis Cultus* 30.

[23] *Marialis Cultus* 31.

[24] John Paul II, *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* 29.

Samaritan as it is told in the Gospel of Luke (10:25–37). It is only the person with a compassionate heart (a "sacred" heart) who reaches out to the traveler attacked by robbers; the Good Samaritan spends of his own time and money to care for the stranger. Is not this a model of Christian love in our day? Jesus' life and teaching was a constant reaching out to the needy (the woman caught in adultery, the man born blind, the ten lepers, the hemorrhaging woman, the widow who lost her only son, the hungry crowd). Linking popular piety with texts of Scripture will contribute significantly to its genuine renewal.

9. What is the relationship between popular religiosity and culture? Popular piety arises out of the interaction between culture and the Catholic faith. When the faith enters a cultural milieu, two kinds of transformation take place (missionaries are very cognizant of this dynamic). First, the newly introduced faith begins to have a transformative effect on the culture; the Gospel and its values begin to leave an imprint on the people and their socio-cultural realities. At the same time, however, the Church begins to assimilate certain cultural aspects, absorbing positive elements into her life and practice. In brief, this is the two-fold action found in the process of inculturating the faith.

A short description of the growth of popular religiosity, drawn from the *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy*, is as follows:

> In genuine forms of popular piety, the Gospel message assimilates expressive forms particular to a given culture while also permeating the consciousness of that culture with the content of the Gospel, and its idea of life and death, and of human freedom, mission and destiny.[25]

This means that the Christian faith is able to enter every culture, and people are able to begin living their faith within their own cultural milieu.

As the document of the USA bishops notes, while

> this inculturation of the faith takes place in the liturgy, popular devotions carry the faith a step deeper into the everyday life of a

[25] *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines*, 63.

> particular culture. When properly ordered to the liturgy, popular devotions perform an irreplaceable function of bringing worship into daily life for people of various cultures and times.[26]

A clear benefit of this "religion-culture interpenetration" is that faith begins to permeate the daily lives of the ordinary faithful. Such "inculturated proclamation" is the goal of all effective missionary evangelization.

10. How does one explain the fact that there are so many different forms of popular devotion? Popular devotions clearly manifest the fact that "one size does not fit all." Various devotional practices correspond to the diverse spiritual needs of certain people at different times and places. In addition, cultural diversity and sensibilities differ greatly; various artistic and aesthetic expressions possess a different appeal for a variety of individuals. In a word, what appeals to a Filipino may not attract a Korean; the religious "tastes" or "preferences" of an Indonesian believer are divergent from those of a Japanese Christian.

Commenting on the different forms of Marian devotion emerging from various cultural and historical contexts, Paul VI explained that the Church

> does not bind herself to any particular expression of an individual cultural epoch or to the particular anthropological ideas underlying such expressions. The Church understands that certain outward religious expressions, while perfectly valid in themselves, may be less suitable to men and women of different ages and cultures.[27]

This present discussion clearly surfaces the larger question of effective approaches to evangelization and the communication of the faith. Evidently, adaptation and flexibility are necessary in selecting and promoting the popular devotions most suitable for diverse groups of people. The Church and her evangelizers need to enter deeply into

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[26]United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Popular Devotional Practices: Basic Questions and Answers* (2003), 4.

[27]*Marialis Cultus* 36.

the realities of a particular people so as to understand their unique spiritual needs and gifts. Incarnating the faith in new missionary situations is a never-ending and challenging task, needing the active guidance of the Holy Spirit coupled with the creativity and dedication of committed evangelizers.

11. What is the ideal relationship between the liturgy and popular devotions? The liturgy remains the center of the devotional life of the Church; thus, popular devotions should never be portrayed as equal to the liturgy or as a substitute for it. The liturgy-popular piety relationship

> must be approached primarily from the perspective of the directives contained in the constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* [the Vatican II document on the liturgy], 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.[28]

Succinctly stated, the position of the Church is: "The liturgy and popular piety, while not coterminous, remain two legitimate expressions of Christian worship." Indeed, "the liturgy and popular piety are two forms of worship which are in mutual and fruitful relationship with each other." It is also a fact that "popular piety, because of its symbolic and expressive qualities, can often provide the liturgy with important insights for inculturation and stimulate an effective dynamic creativity."[29]

Paul VI, however, recognized that maintaining a proper balance may not always be easy. He noted that there are two extreme attitudes that should be avoided. On the one hand, he rejected the position of those

> who scorn, *a priori,* devotions of piety which, in their correct forms, have been recommended by the magisterium, who leave them aside and in this way create a vacuum which they do not fill. They forget

[28] *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines*, 50.

[29] *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines*, 58.

> that the Council has said that devotions of piety should harmonize with the liturgy, not be suppressed.[30]

On the other hand, Paul VI likewise did not accept the position of

> those who without wholesome liturgical and pastoral criteria mix practices of piety and liturgical acts in hybrid celebrations. It sometimes happens that novenas or similar practices are inserted into the very celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice. This creates the danger that the Lord's memorial rite, instead of being the culmination of the meeting of the Christian community, becomes the occasion as it were for devotional practices.[31]

Themes such as balance, harmonization, proper independence, and prudent coordination seem to express the guiding norms for relating liturgy and popular piety. In this area, much pastoral sensitivity and wisdom is required by the leaders of the Christian community.

12. Has Pope Francis expressed his views on popular piety? In his comprehensive apostolic exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel* (*Evangelii Gaudium*), Francis devotes an entire section to "the evangelizing power of popular piety."[32] Some brief selections capture the thought of the pope.

> Popular piety enables us to see how the faith, once received, becomes embodied in a culture and is constantly passed on. Once looked down upon, popular piety came to be appreciated once more in the decades following the Council. In the Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Pope Paul VI gave a decisive impulse in this area. There he stated 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." Closer to our own time, Benedict XVI, speaking about Latin America, pointed out that popular piety is "a precious

[30] *Marialis Cultus* 31.

[31] *Marialis Cultus* 15.

[32] Cf. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 122–126.

> treasure of the Catholic Church," in which "we see the soul of the Latin American peoples."[33]
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> The Aparecida Document describes the riches which the Holy Spirit pours forth in popular piety by his gratuitous initiative. On that beloved continent, where many Christians express their faith through popular piety, the bishops also refer to it as "popular spirituality" or "the people's mysticism." It is truly "a spirituality incarnated in the culture of the lowly…." It is "a legitimate way of living the faith, a way of feeling part of the Church and a manner of being missionaries"; it brings with itself the grace of being a missionary, of coming out of oneself and setting out on pilgrimage.[34]
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> Underlying popular piety, as a fruit of the inculturated Gospel, is an active evangelizing power which we must not underestimate: to do so would be to fail to recognize the work of the Holy Spirit. Instead, we are called to promote and strengthen it, in order to deepen the never-ending process of inculturation. Expressions of popular piety have much to teach us; for those who are capable of reading them, they are a *locus theologicus* which demands our attention, especially at a time when we are looking to the new evangelization.[35]

13. Did Pope Francis speak about popular piety before he became pope? In a 2012 lecture, then-Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio spoke about the "theology of the people," which he holds in high regard. According to him, this theology is rooted in the ordinary people's deep faith, which they expressed through their customs, traditions, religious practices, and sense of justice. He considered popular piety as an antithesis of the pervasive secularization in modern society.

Although the Latin American society is saddled with poverty and injustices, Bergoglio notes that its people manifest a wealth of religiosity through festive and lively forms of piety such as vigils, processions, communal prayers, etc.—which the Aparecida document of 2007 calls "popular spirituality." He said: "When we approach our people with

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[33] *Evangelii Gaudium* 123.

[34] *Evangelii Gaudium* 124.

[35] *Evangelii Gaudium* 126.

the gaze of the good shepherd, when we do not come to judge but to love, we can find out that this cultural way to express the Christian faith is still present among us, especially in our poor." He affirmed that "popular spirituality is the original way through which the Holy Spirit has led and continues to lead millions of our brothers."[36]

Cardinal Bergoglio himself promoted various forms of popular piety in Buenos Aires. For example, he popularized the devotion to "Our Lady, Undoer of Knots." He propagated the suggestive image of *La Virgen Desatanudos*, a title originating in Augsburg, Germany (*Maria Knotenlöserin*). He has also popularized the image of the "Sleeping Saint Joseph." Cardinal Tagle of Manila has thus affirmed that Francis is very comfortable with popular religiosity because it is a means to strengthen the faith; in popular piety, "the Holy Spirit and the culture of the poor meet."[37]

Confirming his plans to visit Mexico in 2016 during a Mass held on December 12, 2015, the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Francis said that he will pray for Christian communities that they "may become oases and rivers of mercy." He added: "To ask her this, in a strong way, I will travel to venerate her at her shrine on February 13 [2016]. There I will ask this for all of America, of whom she is especially a mother." Francis' appreciation of popular piety and spirituality can truly serve as an inspiration for the entire Church.[38]

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[36]Andrea Gagliarducci, "The 'Theology of the People', according to Pope Francis," *Catholic News Agency* (http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/the-theology-of-the-people-according-to-pope-francis-83384/ [accessed April 28, 2015]).

[37]Jasper Emmanuel Arcalas, "What Francis Likes: 'Popular Piety' that Plays Big Roles in Pinoys' Faith," *The Filipino Connection* (http://thefilipinoconnection.net/papal-visit-2015-what-francis-likes-popular-piety-that-plays-big-roles-in-pinoys-faith/ [accessed January 13, 2015]).

[38]Junno Arocho Esteves, "Pope Francis Will Venerate Mary at Mexico Shrine Next Year," *Catholic News Service* (http://www.catholicnews.com/services/englishnews/2015/pope-francis-will-venerate-mary-at-mexico-shrine-next-year.cfm [accessed December 14, 2015]).

Conclusion. The lengthy experience of the Church has taught it that authentic popular devotions are an invaluable means of promoting the faith and a deeper love of God, and that the profound spiritual values present in popular piety are to be preserved and promoted. Popular religiosity has, in fact, preserved the faith of countless Catholics across the globe, especially those who have lacked adequate catechesis and the presence of ordained ministers of the Church.

Such conclusions are truly valid in the Philippine context (the *locus* of this author's pastoral experience) where the people-per-priest ratio is among the highest in the world. The veracity of these assertions would be readily confirmed by priests, religious, catechists, and missionaries working in diverse contexts. Filipino popular religiosity, especially its Marian dimensions, has been recognized for its significant contribution in preserving and promoting the faith-life of local Christians, as this author can verify. In 1985, John Paul II wrote to Filipino Catholics: "One of your best-loved hymns says that you are a '*pueblo amante de Maria*,' a people with a special love and devotion to Mary. My earnest wish is that you will never cease to be '*pueblo amante de Maria*'; … Be confident that your turning to Mary's intercession … will not be in vain."[39]

Indeed, popular piety remains a potent resource that necessarily must be at the service of a renewed evangelization for future generations of believers across the face of global Catholicism. Folk religiosity should thus figure prominently in all effective programs of the "new evangelization," especially for the youth. The challenge to profoundly integrate faith and life remains urgent, and so, as fervent Catholics, the popular prayer to Mary remains in our hearts, on our

[39]John Paul II, "Message to Dearly Beloved Sisters and Brothers in the Philippines (December 8, 1985)," in Howard Q. Dee, et al., eds., *Bimillennium—Kaarawan ni Maria: 1985 Marian Year Book* (Makati City, Philippines: Bahay Maria-Assisi Development Foundation, 1986), 4–5. See also Antonio Ll. Mabutas, "The Marian Year 1985: A Pilgrimage of Hope with Our Blessed Mother" (Pastoral Exhortation on the Marian Year 1985 issued on February 2, 1985), in Pedro Quitorio, ed., *Pastoral Letters: 1945–1995* (Manila: Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, 1996), 593–602.

lips, and guides our efforts as missionary disciples: "Mary, show us the blessed fruit of your womb, Jesus."