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THE PHILIPPINES

An Asiatic and Catholic Archipelago

by Pierre de Charentenay, S.J.

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Reviewed by Roberto E. N. Rivera, S.J.

In his latest work, French Jesuit Fr. Pierre de Charentenay gives what can be described, for lack of an all-inclusive term, as a social-political-cultural-economic overview of the "Asiatic and Catholic Archipelago." As a long time observer of Philippine society and with his distinctive qualifications in the social sciences (most notably as President of the Jesuit Faculty of Centre Sèvres, Paris and as Editor-in-Chief of *Etudes*), Charentenay is eminently qualified to provide this wide-ranging analysis. The volume is clearly meant for those attempting an initial, in-depth understanding of the Philippines while having much to offer to those more familiar with, and immersed in, the country's realities.

Charentenay conducts his investigation by positing the existence of "fractures" between the country's colonial past and the exigencies of local identities and cultures. He begins with a compact but serviceable historical background of the country. To his credit, Charentenay does not attempt an exhaustive chronicle. Rather, drawing from reliable Philippine social histories and historical reflections (de la Costa, Sturtevant, Nery, etc.), he gives a sufficient preview of the colonial influences that have contributed to the "hybridization" of the Philippine nation. This in turn serves as the context in which fractures transpire: the primary one between the colonial and the local, and the

other fundamental fractures stemming from it. Examples presented by Charentenay include the social upheavals preceding the first EDSA revolution, the continuing economic travails of large portions of the populace, the political scandals spawned by graft and corruption, moving down to the uniqueness and the contradictions behind local linguistic expressions and religious devotions. He develops these through vignettes or mini case studies drawn from his extensive observations and travels throughout the archipelago.

Religion plays an important part in Charentenay's analysis, for he sees Filipino Catholic faith at the nexus of the hybridization process that has been both a boon and a bane for Philippine society. As the most lasting legacy of the Spanish colonial empire, Catholicism is a seminal influence in the formation of the nation's long-standing but also evolving traditions, norms, and values. And, as a permanent fixture in current social and cultural life, the institutional Church continues to provide the definitive (if not unchallenged) moral compass for this vast Catholic nation.

The volume is therefore particularly effective when Charentenay is able to narrate how the various forces of history converge to push fractures to the breaking point, with the Catholic Church playing a crucial role in (or in some cases, defaulting from) unleashing movements that can help resolve the conflict. In his extensive study of the 1986 EDSA "People Power" revolution ("EDSA I"), for instance, he traces how the dictatorial Marcos regime represents the transmogrification of inequitable power arrangements that originated from the earliest days of the Spanish colonial occupation. As the Marcos regime came to a head with the aspirations for freedom of a long oppressed nation, Charentenay recounts how the Catholic Church and civil society were able to challenge the dictatorship and help restore democratic institutions. However, precisely because the inequitable power interests that gave rise to the dictatorship have been so well-entrenched, the revolution ends up as an unfinished one. In the succession of presidents from Corazon Aquino to Benigno "Noynoy" Aquino III, the fragile democracy continues to be fractured in various ways, with the Catholic Church revising its modes of social and political engagement accordingly.

Charentenay takes these same forces and demonstrates how the persistent economic inequalities besetting the nation are in continuity with the inequitable power arrangements challenged, but not completely overthrown, by EDSA I. Surveying the vast problems of economic distribution and urban blight, he concludes that security of land tenure and stability of employment are the two "keys of development" for economic equity. He also enhances his narrative in this section with various first-hand experiences in impoverished communities and institutions catering to the poor, including post-Haiyan Tacloban, the New Bilibid Prison in Muntinlupa City, and the Philippine General Hospital in Manila.

His exposition, however, hits a bit of a snag with the somewhat ill-fitting chapter on hybridity, where Charentenay attempts to further expound on the thesis he has borrowed from de la Costa. He jumps from national historical developments to the workings of the Filipino psyche, but does so neither thoroughly nor incisively enough to give justice to the complexities of such phenomena. A short section on linguistic nuances in choice Filipino expressions (e.g., *bahala na, pakikisama, hiya*) gives glimpses of the more in-depth analysis that can be done in this regard, but is undertaken too fleetingly to add substance to the discussion. An extended treatment on nepotism and political dynasties is also included, but this analysis may have been better served by being integrated into his earlier sections detailing the restoration of democratic institutions after Marcos.

Charentenay begins to right the ship with his chapter on the recent "pork barrel" scandals in the Congress and Senate, where various legislators were charged with misappropriating the Priority Development Assistance Fund allocated for their priority projects. His narrative is a bit weighed down by details which even the ordinary Filipino familiar with the issue will find hard to follow. However, the chapter forwards the analysis of hybridity/fractures by showing how Philippine governance is caught between what he describes as two competing "logics": the demands of effective and professional governance on the one hand, and the accommodations made to political culture on the other. Charentenay ends his narrative by showing how the two main actors in the Philippines' march towards

democratization and stability—the Church and civil society—have responded to the challenge of bringing peace and development to the nation in the midst of continuing fractures. In the "associative dynamism" of civil society, and in the "exuberance" of local religious practice, he sees untapped resources for further mobilizing adherents for the work of social justice.

In his conclusion, Charentenay identifies how Philippine society has to continue working towards a functional differentiation between the personal sphere of relationships and the public sphere of accountability, especially in politics and governance. Nationalist leaning historians and social scientists may find Charentenay's conclusions a bit patronizing, especially in the light of the "damaged culture" discourse. But his work is offered not just as a critique of flaws and faults, but also as an identification of promise and potential. His analysis is well worth considering as the Philippines moves forward under the Duterte administration.

CONTRIBUTORS

Reginald Alva, S.V.D., is a Catholic priest belonging to the Society of the Divine Word. He teaches at Nanzan University, Japan, and is also involved in pastoral and renewal work in the Catholic Church of Japan. He has a licentiate in Biblical Theology and a doctorate in Theology (Spirituality) from Pontificia Università San Tommaso D'Aquino, Angelicum, Rome. His major publications include *Mary and the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement* (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2012), *The Spirituality of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement* (New Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2014), and *Spiritual Renewal in Japan: The Journey of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement* (New Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2015).

Enrico C. Eusebio, Jr., S.J., is associate professor of Canon Law at Loyola School of Theology. He served as Dean of LST from 2010–2014 and as Vice President for Academic Affairs from 2014–2016 while concurrently serving as Director of the Theology and Ministry Program of the School of Humanities of the Ateneo de Manila University. He was appointed in 2011 as judge at the Diocesan Tribunal of the Diocese of Novaliches, Quezon City, and as Defender of the Bond at the Metropolitan Tribunal of Manila in 2014. He obtained his licentiate degree in Canon Law from the Pontifical Gregorian University (Rome) and his doctoral degree in Canon Law from the Pontifical Salesian University (Rome).

Joseph B. Johnson is an instructor at the Department of Theology, Ateneo de Manila University, where he teaches the course "Marriage, Family Life, and Human Sexuality in a Catholic Perspective." He holds the degrees of Bachelor of Arts in Catholic Theology (Seton Hall University, 2009); Bachelor of Arts in Theology and Religious Studies and Sacrae Theologiae Baccalaureus (KU Leuven, 2011); and Master of Arts in Society, Law, and Religion (KU Leuven, 2014). He is currently pursuing the degrees of Master of Arts in Canon Law and Juris Canonici Licentiatus as a distance learning student. He is currently

writing a thesis on the role of the diocesan bishop in Roman Catholic and Philippine Independent Church canon law.

James H. Kroeger, M.M., has served mission in Asia (Philippines and Bangladesh) since 1970, working in parishes and the education-formation apostolate of seminarians, catechists, and lay leaders. Currently, he teaches Christology, Ecclesiology, Missiology, and "Asian Theology" at Loyola School of Theology, East Asian Pastoral Institute, and Mother of Life Catechetical Center in Metro Manila. He has written extensively on Asian (FABC) and Philippine theology, mission, interfaith dialogue, and on the Second Vatican Council. His recent books include: *Telling the San Jose Story: Historical Perspectives* (Manila: San Jose Seminary Alumni Association); *Asia's Dynamic Local Churches* (Manila: Claretians); *Becoming Missionary Disciples* (Manila: PMS); *A Vatican II Journey: Fifty Milestones* and *Walking in the Light of Faith* (Manila: St. Paul); and *The Gift of Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books).

Leo-Martin Angelo R. Ocampo completed his Master of Arts degree, Major in Theological Studies at the Loyola School of Theology, Ateneo de Manila University, in 2015. He graduated from the same university in 2007 with a Bachelor of Arts degree, Major in Philosophy (Pre-Divinity track) while undergoing formation in San José Seminary. Previously, he had taught Christian Life Education at Xavier School in San Juan and worked in Mindanao with youth volunteers, indigenous peoples, and municipal leaders as Program Coordinator of the Companions of Assisi for Peace Volunteer Program and Program Assistant of the Public Private Partnership for Peace, Justice, and Development Program of Assisi Development Foundation. At present, he teaches Theology, Philosophy, and Sociology at the Pontifical and Royal University of Santo Tomas where he is also taking up doctoral studies, major in Theology. Among his recent works are translations in Filipino of Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'* and apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, published by Claretian Publications with permission from Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

Roberto E. N. Rivera, S.J., is Director of Southeast Asia Rural Social Leadership Institute (SEARSOLIN) in Cagayan de Oro City, Philippines. As Assistant to the Jesuit Provincial Superior for Social Apostolate, he coordinates a network of Jesuit institutions doing direct engagement with, and in support of, the poor and marginalized sectors in the Philippines. He obtained his Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, U.S.A., taught Sociology and Anthropology at the Ateneo de Manila University, and worked as Research Associate of the John J. Carroll Institute on Church and Social Issues (ICSI).