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INCULTURATION OF THE LITURGICAL YEAR IN THE PHILIPPINES

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> The liturgical year is to be revised so that the traditional customs and discipline of the sacred seasons shall be preserved or restored to suit the conditions of modern times; their specific character is to be retained, so that they duly nourish the piety of the faithful who celebrate the mysteries of Christian redemption and, above all, the paschal mystery. (*Sacrosanctum concilium* 107)

Apropos of this decree from *Sacrosanctum concilium*, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments published the *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy* on December 17, 2001. In this directory, the Congregation wished to highlight that other forms of piety among the Christian people should not be overlooked, nor should their useful contribution to living in unity with Christ in the Church be forgotten.[1]

Both the directory and SC 107 are important bases for inculturating the liturgical year in the Philippines, which at present seems to be an element in the Church that has remained untouched by inculturation—or has it? There is no official attempt at inculturation from the viewpoint of the episcopal commission, yet *de facto* inculturation of

[1] *Sacrosanctum concilium* 12 & 13.

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the liturgical year has been taking place even before the liturgical restoration of Vatican II, and continues to develop to this day.

A survey of the liturgical year as observed in the Church in the Philippines reveals how much popular piety, so close to Filipino religiosity, has profoundly influenced its inculturation. Indeed, popular piety is so intertwined with Filipino life that the profound interpenetration of culture and religiosity has transformed the observance of the liturgical year in the Philippine Church without much effort or pain. To help us understand such *de facto* inculturation, this article will provide a description of practices observed in the Philippines throughout the liturgical year.

Advent Season

Misa de Gallo or *Simbanggabi*

Christmas season in the Philippines traditionally begins with Advent, nine days before the Solemnity of the Birth of the Lord is celebrated. This preparation takes the form of nine dawn Masses at four o'clock in the morning starting on December 16. Known as the *Misa de Gallo* (Rooster's Mass) or *Misa de Aguinaldo* (Gift Mass)[2] in the traditional Spanish and in Filipino as *Simbang Gabi* (or Night Mass), this novena of Masses is the most important Filipino tradition at Christmastime.

Many of the faithful consider these nine dawn Masses as an occasion to obtain special graces. Going to Mass this early for nine consecutive days is meant to show their devotion and faith as well as heighten anticipation for the Nativity of Jesus. In traditional Filipino belief, however, completing the novena is also supposed to mean that God will grant the devotee's special wish or favor.

[2]Lilia Borlongan-Álvarez, "Misa de Gallo or Misa de Aguinaldo—What's the Difference?" *Manila Bulletin* (December 24, 2014).

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After attending Mass, Filipino families partake of traditional Philippine Christmastime delicacies either during breakfast at home or immediately outside the church where they are sold. Vendors offer a wealth of native delicacies, including *bibingka* (a rice flour- and egg-based cake cooked using coals on top of and under the pastry), *puto bumbong* (a purple sticky rice delicacy steamed in bamboo tubes with brown sugar and shredded dried coconut meat serving as condiments), *salabat* (hot ginger tea), and *tsokolate* (thick Spanish cocoa).

Christmas Season

Panunuluyan

On Christmas Eve, Catholic devotees in various Philippine provinces reenact the journey of Joseph and the pregnant Blessed Virgin Mary in search of lodging for the soon-to-be-born Jesus Christ. This is the *Panunuluyan* (also called *Pananawagan* and *Pananapatan*) which traces its origin from the Mexican practice of the *Posadas*.

This street pageant is performed after dark, with the actors portraying Saint Joseph and the Virgin going to pre-designated houses. They chant a traditional folksong that is meant to wake up the owner of the house and ask for lodging. The owners turn them away, however, doing so also through song. Finally, Joseph and Mary make their way to the parish church where a simulated manger has been set up. The birth of Jesus is celebrated at midnight, or close to it, with the solemn *Misa de Aguinaldo*, the first of the three Masses of Christmas.

Noche Buena

For Filipinos, the Vigil of Christmas (*Bisperas ng Pasko*) on December 24th is celebrated with the Midnight Mass, which is followed immediately after with the much-anticipated *Noche Buena*, the traditional Christmas Eve feast. Family members dine together at midnight on traditional fare that includes *queso de bola* ("ball of cheese,"

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usually of the edam variety), *tsokolate*, and *jamón* (ham). Some would also open presents at this time.

Christmas Day

Christmas Day in the Philippines is primarily a family affair, with Filipinos visiting members of the extended family, preferably in the morning and notably the elders, in order to pay their respects. Called *pagmamano*, the age-old tradition of giving respect in the Philippines is done by touching one's forehead to the elder's hand while saying "mano po." The elder in turn blesses the person who has paid respect. *Aguinaldo* (gift) in the form of crisp, fresh-from-the-bank bills are then given (mostly to younger children) after the *pagmamano*.

A Christmas lunch usually follows after the *pagmamano*. This lunch is heavily dependent upon financial status—wealthier families tend to prepare grand and glorious feasts that consist of *jamon*, *queso de bola*, *lechon* (whole roast pig), and other Filipino delicacies while others choose to cook simpler meals (which are still special nonetheless). The exchange of gifts then occurs typically after lunch, with godparents expected to give gifts or *aguinaldo* to their godchildren. Finally, when evening comes, families usually settle into conversation while listening to their favorite carols, with some opting to have a glorious Christmas feast for dinner.

New Year's Eve

On December 31, the seventh day of the Christmas Octave or New Year's Eve (*Bisperas ng Bagong Taon*), Filipino families gather for the *media noche* or midnight meal—a feast that is also supposed to symbolize their hopes for a prosperous New Year. Many Filipinos also see firecrackers as the traditional means to greet the New Year in spite of the yearly ban on them, for the loud noises and sounds of merrymaking are meant not only to celebrate the coming of the New Year but also to supposedly drive away evil spirits (albeit safer methods of merrymaking include banging on pots and pans and blowing on car horns). Other folk beliefs include encouraging children to jump at

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the stroke of midnight so that they will grow tall, displaying round-shaped fruits and wearing clothes with dots and other circular designs to symbolize desire for a better life (represented by the round shape or circular design, an allusion to money), eating twelve grapes at midnight for good luck in the twelve months of the coming year, and opening windows and doors during the first day of the new year to let the good luck in. Although common in the Philippines, most of these beliefs are of Chinese provenance.

Decorations

A Filipino Christmas would not be complete without the traditional Christmas symbols and decorations commonly found throughout the country. Christmas lights, for instance, are strung about in festoons that serve as the tail of the Star of Bethlehem in the crèche, locally called *belén* (Spanish for Bethlehem); these are shaped like stars, Christmas trees, angels, and in a large variety of other ways, with some even going as far as draping the entire façade of the house in lights. Aside from Western decorations like Santa Claus, Christmas trees, tinsel, and so forth, the Philippines has its own ways of celebrating the Christmas season indeed.

Paról

Though not strictly a custom, Filipino homes and buildings are adorned every Christmas season with beautiful star-shaped lanterns called *paról* (Spanish *faról*, meaning lantern or lamp). What to Filipinos is the Christmas tree to Americans, the *paról* represents the Star of Bethlehem that guided the Magi in their search for the newborn Child. It is an iconic and beloved symbol of the holiday.

The earliest *paróls* were traditionally made from bamboo sticks and crepe, lacquered, or Japanese rice paper (*papel de Japón*), and were illuminated with a candle or coconut oil-lamp. Later versions were then crafted out of a wider variety of materials, including cellophane, plastic, rope, and *capiz* shell. Present day *paról* can also take many

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different shapes and forms, the most basic of which is a 5-pointed star with a "tail" attached to each of the bottom two tips. Others come in variations with 4, 8, and 10 points, along with rarer ones that have 6 or 16 points, and so on.

Belén

Another traditional Filipino Christmas symbol is the *belén*, a crèche or tableau depicting the Nativity scene. It shows the infant Jesus in the manger surrounded by the Virgin Mary, St. Joseph, the shepherds, their flock, the Magi, some stable animals, and angels. Although of Italian-Franciscan origin, it has been thoroughly inculturated in the Philippines and has become part of Filipino Christmas celebrations ever since. *Beléns* are set up in churches, homes, schools, and even in office buildings. They can be extravagant as well, using various materials for the figures and Christmas lights, *paróls*, and painted backgrounds for the scenery.

Caroling

Just like the *belén*, caroling is not specifically native to the Philippines but has been adopted nevertheless as part of the Filipino Christmas celebration. Children in small groups go from house to house singing Christmas carols while using makeshift instruments such as empty cans and tambourines made with metal bottle caps strung on a piece of wire. With the traditional chant of *namamasko po!*, these carolers wait expectantly for the homeowners to reward them with coins or candies.

Caroling in more recent times has also become a fund-raising activity. Church choirs or youth groups spend weeks rehearsing Christmas carols then draw up a schedule of visits to wealthy patrons in their homes or even to corporate offices (often coinciding with the office Christmas party). These are, in effect, mini Christmas concerts where excellent performances are amply rewarded with an envelope of cash or checks. Unlike traditional children's caroling, however, the performers donate the earnings to their group's projects rather than partake of it themselves.

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Lenten Season

Pasyón

The *Pasyón* (from the Spanish *Pasión*) is a narrative of the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ woven into a poem with stanzas of five lines that have eight syllables each. This form of the Passion narrative is popular in the Philippines and has been given the nomenclature *Pabasa* (Tagalog for "to cause to be read"). Performed during the Lenten season, sometimes during Holy Week, it is a form of religious expression, meditation, and reflection which is normally chanted at home, at a small chapel called *visita*, or at a makeshift open air altar. The chanting is carried out continuously throughout the day and night until the entire narrative is completed, with chanters taking turns while refreshments are served for them and for anyone who drops by.

First published in either 1703 or 1704, the original text of the *Pasyón* was called *Ang Mahal na Pasión ni JesuCristong Panginoon Natin na Tola* (literally, "The Poem of the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ") by its author, the priest Gaspar Aquino de Belén. The more popular version, however, is the *Casaysayan nang Pasiong Mahal ni Jesucristong Panginoon Natin na Sucat Ipag-alab nang Puso nang Sinomang Babasa* ("The History of the Passion of Jesus Christ Our Lord that Will Set Afire the Heart of Whosoever Reads It").

Senakulo

The *Senakulo* (from the Spanish *cenaculo*) is a Lenten play that depicts events from the Old and New Testaments related to the life, sufferings, and death of Christ. Presented for at least eight nights (from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday), it is traditionally performed on an open-air proscenium-type stage with painted cloth or paper backdrops called *telón*. Women and men who have taken a vow before the Lord to play a particular character in return for the granting of favors, e.g., the healing of sickness or in atonement for sins, usually serve as performers. Such roles may be passed on to willing family members, and some even have

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the privilege of being buried in the vestment they wore as *senakulistas* upon their death, particularly for those who played the roles of Christ and the Blessed Virgin.

Biblical characters in the play are garbed in traditional vestments as seen on church statues; hence, for example, the actor playing Christ is vested in a velvet maroon tunic with gold embroidery, and wears a dyed abaca wig with a metal crown of thorns on his head along with the *potencia*—three metal rays rising from the top of the wig (as seen in many church images of the Suffering Christ). The character of the Blessed Virgin is dressed in a gold-embroidered dark blue tunic and black mantle *cum* veil, and wears a long, dyed abaca wig as well as a metal sunburst halo that frames her face (as seen in images of the Mater Dolorosa). These and other "holy" characters chant their lines and walk in measured steps to the tune of slow music, whereas the *Romanos* and *Judíos*, the "enemies" of Christ, speak in aggressive tones and march around in *paso doble* steps to the beat of marshal music from a live brass band. The ingenious use of stage backdrops and fireworks also provides further delight and entertainment to the audience, especially the children, while at the same time providing catechesis and subjects for reflection concerning the Lenten season.

Street *senakulo*, on the other hand, is a form of penance where the passion play characters walk in a procession. Locals act as Roman soldiers, pounding on doors to search for Jesus in their menacingly painted masks and armors. Most anticipated among the episodes of the play are the judgment of Jesus, the Crucifixion, and His Seven Last Words. Spectators, ranging from devotees to the merely curious, line the route of the procession, eager to witness the reenactments. Some use this as an opportunity to reflect on the life of Jesus; others treat it as a chance to spend time with family and friends.

Semana Santa

In this predominantly Roman Catholic country, Holy Week, *Semana Santa*, or *Mahal na Araw* is one of the most important religious observances. Beginning on Holy Thursday and up until Black Saturday, most businesses shut down operations while local television and radio

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stations across the nation either put on religious-themed shows, play religious or subdued music, or stay off the air completely. Starting at noon on Good Friday, some television channels and radio stations broadcast live reflections on the Seven Last Words of Jesus from major churches and cathedrals throughout the country.

Holy Wednesday

In many parishes that can afford it, a tradition followed on Holy Wednesday is the staging of a candle-lit procession of both antique and recent-vintage statues that depict episodes of the Passion of the Lord, beginning with the Last Supper all the way to the Deposition from the Cross. These images, many of them family heirlooms that date back to the Spanish colonial period, are mounted on sumptuously-decorated and well-lit carriages or *carrozas*. Some of the more antique ones have ivory faces and hands; others feature movable hands and heads. Indeed, such processions can rival even those that are held in Sevilla and Málaga in Spain, or in Guatemala in Central America.

Paschal Triduum

Maundy Thursday

A common and widespread practice in the Philippines after the Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday is the *Visita Iglesia*, the local adaptation of the Roman practice of visiting the seven Roman basilicas. Families and friends troop to seven various churches to visit the reposed Blessed Sacrament, pray the *Via Crucis*, or go to Confession.

Good Friday

Good Friday is a day marked mainly with somber tones and subdued behavior: the busiest of thoroughfares and highways mostly become deserted and relatively free of vehicles; penitential processions of flagellants and cross bearers (although not approved by the Church

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because of health-risk factors) take place alongside official Church services in the afternoon. The faithful in practically all churches gather around the image of the Crucified to kiss its feet, an extension of the Veneration of the Cross of the mid-afternoon service. In many parishes, the procession of the *Santo Entierro* (the Dead Christ) and the *Mater Dolorosa* takes place at sundown. Similar to the Holy Wednesday procession, here the images of saints—the apostles and holy women—who followed Christ in his Passion are carried along the principal thoroughfares. Not surprisingly, the image of the Dead Christ is the one that attracts the most number of devotees to follow it.

Easter Sunday

Easter morning is marked with joyous celebration, beginning with the dawn ceremony called the *Salubong* or *Encuentro* (meeting) of the Risen Christ and His Sorrowful Mother. Their images borne in procession move away from the parish church in opposite directions, the men bearing the image of the Risen Christ in a well-lit carriage and the women bearing that of the Virgin draped in a mourning veil. The two groups then converge at the town square or a designated place where little girls dressed as angels and with flower baskets in their hands await them on a makeshift tower or scaffold. After the greeting of the parish priest, the images are made to face each other and a little girl sings the *Regina caeli*. She then lifts the mourning veil from the Virgin's face while the other girls take up the *Alleluia* and shower the images with flowers from their baskets. The priest then incenses the images and says the concluding prayer, after which the choir sings the *Gloria in excelsis* as the processions move back to the church for the first Mass of Easter Sunday.

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Easter Season

Santa Cruz and *Flores de Mayo*

Two Marian devotions are observed simultaneously in the Philippines during the month of May: one is the procession of the *Santa Cruz de Mayo* or *Santacruzan* which celebrates the May 3rd feast of the Finding of the True Cross by Saint Helena, mother of the Roman Emperor Constantine; the other is the *Flores de Mayo*, a month-long devotion that consists of a daily offering of flowers to the Virgin and which culminates in a crowning of her image and a procession in her honor at the end of the month.

Although conceived of as a celebration of the finding of the Cross, the *Santacruzan* has a Marian flavor because the young women who take part in this procession, called *zagalas*, assume either the roles of Biblical women in the Old Testament who are deemed figures of the Blessed Virgin Mary (hence they carry titles such as *Reyna Judit* or *Reyna Ester*) or the embodiment of Christian virtues (with titles such as *Reyna Fe*, *Reyna Esperanza*, and *Reyna Caridad* [faith, hope, and charity]). The woman who carries the title of *Reyna Elena*, however, walks just before the carriage of the Virgin and is considered the most important figure in this procession, which may take place anytime in the month of May and not necessarily under the auspices of the parish church.

Flores de Mayo, on the other hand, is a manifestly Marian devotion. Following the daily prayers and offering of flowers, a grand procession is held at the end of the month in which young women, also called *zagalas*, carry titles of the Blessed Virgin as listed in the Litany of Loreto. They usually wear long white gowns and a sash identifying the particular title or virtue of the Virgin which each one represents. The image of the Virgin, crowned earlier in the church, is borne by devotees at the back of the procession.

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Ordinary Time

All Souls' Day

Considered public holidays in the Philippines, November 1 and 2 are observed as days for remembering the dead, just as in other Christian countries. Called *Todos los Santos* (All Saints') or *Undas*, these days are very important for Filipinos (second only to Christmas and Holy Week) and are more for family reunions. Feverish preparations begin at cemeteries and memorial parks in the weeks and days prior—tombs are cleaned or repainted; plants and shrubs are pruned and trimmed. The faithful then troop to these places after early morning Mass to spend the day of remembrance with their beloved departed. They usually bring candles and flowers, sometimes even food, to place at the graves, and some even sleep overnight at the cemeteries.

One tradition that is fast disappearing, however, is the neighborhood serenade called *pangangaluluwa* where people masquerading as "holy souls" beg for alms. Instead, the American tradition of "trick or treating" has become more popular in recent years especially in some subdivisions and well-to-do neighborhoods.

Fiestas

Fiestas (festivals or feasts, usually in honor of a patron saint) are celebrated all year round in the Philippines. They make up a tradition originating from the lowland Christian culture of the Spanish colonial era, one enhanced by three hundred years of cultural contact with Mexico through which Spain ruled the Philippines prior to Mexican independence in the early 19th century. Practically each town and village has its own patron—either the Blessed Virgin in one of her many titles or one of the many other saints—along with its own church or chapel. The patronal feast is celebrated with aplomb—there is usually food galore along with street decorations, cultural shows, trade exhibits, competitions, parades, and even street dancing as of late, not to mention the liturgical celebration in the parish church and

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the candlelit procession of the image of the patron saint. Most notable among *fiestas* celebrated are the following:

The Black Nazarene

Although the Black Nazarene is not the patron of Quiapo (St. John the Baptist is), the incredibly large number of devotees of Christ under this title makes the *fiesta* of the Black Nazarene, celebrated annually on January 9, the *de facto fiesta* of this district in Manila.

Affectionately called *Nuestro Padre Jesús Nazareno* by devotees, the Black Nazarene is a life-sized and dark-colored wooden statue of Jesus carrying his cross. It was brought to Manila by Augustinian Recollect friars from Mexico in the 17th century during the time of the galleon trade between Manila and Acapulco. Most of its devotees believe the image to be miraculous—many of them, mostly simple and poor, flock to the Minor Basilica of the Black Nazarene every Friday throughout the year to make their novena to the Suffering Lord for favors requested and to thank him for those granted.

Santo Niño de Cebú

The *Santo Niño de Cebú* (Holy Child of Cebu) is an image of the Child Jesus similar to the Infant Jesus of Prague. It was historically a gift of the explorer Don Fernando Magallanes, who "discovered" the Philippines in the 16th century, to Rajah Humabon and Hara Amihan after they were baptized Carlos and Juana, respectively, in 1521.

The *Santo Niño* has been the patron of Cebu for more than four centuries and continues to be celebrated at the annual *Sinulog*, the principal festival of Cebú which takes place on the third Sunday of January. Other towns and provinces also celebrate the feast, notably Pandacan and Tondo in Manila and Kalibo in Aklan, along with many parishes all over the country. The *Santo Niño* has an immense number of devotees across the nation, and most Filipino homes, offices, and business establishments have an image of the Holy Child on the premises.

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Conclusion

It is needless to say that much still has to be done, foremost among which is a serious evaluation and study of the observances described above, along with an effective catechesis of Filipino Catholics to purify them of superstitious elements and the inevitable encroachment of commercialism and materialism. This will be a formidable task, especially given the fact that many of these observances have been taken out of their religious context and are viewed purely as social events with merely a vague touch of religiosity.

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