INTERSECTING PATHS: BALTHASAR'S THEOLOGICAL AESTHETICS AND FILIPINO *GANDA* IN THE *POÓN* AND *TRASLACIÓN*

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Hans Urs von Balthasar's theological achievement is universally acknowledged if not universally acclaimed. Though unevenly welcomed and endorsed, his theology cannot be ignored. The Swiss theologian's Theological Trilogy, his *magnum opus*, ambitiously attempts to articulate the *mysterium fidei* and the fundamental content of theology from the three transcendentals, boldly starting with the neglected transcendental of beauty. Here Balthasar sketches out a Christian theology that begins with the beautiful. His route of access to theology is the *via pulchritudinis* that "complement[s] the vision of the true and the good."[1]

The word "aesthetics" has two co-essential meanings for Balthasar.[2] The first is that "aesthetics" examines the role that human senses—among which sight has frequently been cited as the most noble—play in the higher levels of human experience. Hence, "theological aesthetics" considers how the senses, along with their corresponding faculties of memory and imagination, contribute to one's understanding of God.

1. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord. A Theological Aesthetics* vol. 1, *Seeing the Form* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1982), 9. Hereafter cited as *GL1*.

2. Aidan Nichols, *A Key to Balthasar: Hans Urs von Balthasar on Beauty, Goodness, and Truth* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2011), 49.

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Balthasar surpasses the consideration of the beauty of the created world by linking aesthetics with the glorious revelation of God: *Herrlichkeit.*[3] This is the second meaning that the term "aesthetics" receives from Balthasar. It refers to a study of beauty, more specifically a description of beauty as a transcendental basis for being, and, most importantly, an investigation of the revealed correlate of beauty which is the *glory of God*.

Balthasar himself concedes that the broad scope of his theological work is still European and that he would have preferred to incorporate specifically Asian sensibilities.[4] Is this aspiration of Balthasar possible? If so, what might be the starting point? This has inspired the writer to attempt to correlate the key concepts of Balthasar's theology of the transcendentals with the Filipino understanding of *ganda*,[5] and to investigate its concrete expressions in the Black Nazarene devotion.

Gestalt and Theological Aesthetics

Faithful to the order of transcendentals that Balthasar proposes, he affirms that everything begins with amazement or admiration before a being. It is the first reaction before the always unfathomable experience that reality exists and that

3. *Herrlichkeit* is the title given by Balthasar to the first part – the seven-volume treatise on aesthetics – of the *Trilogy.* The German term is usually translated in Spanish as *señorío*, and in English as *lordship* or *majesty*.

4. *GL1*, 11.

5. I mostly follow the exposition on Filipino Aesthetics in José M. de Mesa's *When Beauty Beckons: Theological Ethics of Filipino Aesthetics* (Manila: St. Scholastica's College Manila, 2012) and "Kapag ang 'Ganda' ang Pag-uusapan: Mungkahi para sa Dulog at Paraan ng Mabathalang Pag-aaral" in *Ang Maganda sa Teolohiya* (Quezon City: Claretian Communications Foundations, 2017); also in Estela Padilla's "Ganda: Isang Pagtatanging Kultural," in *Ang Maganda sa Teolohiya* (Quezon City: Claretian Communications Foundations, 2017); and in Leonardo Mercado's *Applied Filipino Philosophy* (Tacloban City: Divine Word Publications, 1977).

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it presents itself, calls the observer, and demands a response from it. It is that admiration of the form that appears and arrests one's attention and person. All of this signifies that the very basic and most fundamental facet of existence is an aesthetic reality, which means, the experience of the perception of the form.

Grosso modo, Theological Aesthetics is the study of the contemplation and perception of the beautiful and its rapturous force, which "go inseparably together, for no one can perceive the beautiful without being raptured, and only he who perceives it can be raptured."[6] In other words, aesthetics surveys the perception of any form that is beautiful and its capacity to attract. Therefore, an aesthetics—now in theological terms—that wishes to develop a "Christian theology in the light of the transcendental of beauty (*pulchrum*)," [7] will have to study those same "two moments that have determined since ancient times all aesthetics in which we could call, with Thomas Aquinas, *species* (or form) and *lumen* (or splendor): form and splendor."[8] Form can be understood as that unitary totality that gives an object its identity, that which makes it what it is and not something else , and that which gives it its characteristics. Splendor can be defined as the light that shines from within and pulls others to itself. As a result, form and splendor are inextricably linked as aesthetic elements. For a theological aesthetic, a form will be that of Christ which, with its inner

6. *GL1*, 18.

7. *GL1*, 18, 14.

8. *GL1*, 18. Also, Umberto Eco explains that "Aquinas' functionalist theory of beauty gave systematic expression to a sentiment which was very characteristic of the Middle Ages as a whole. This was its tendency to identify the beautiful and the useful, an identification which itself originated in the equation of the beautiful and the good." See Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, trans. Hugh Bredlin (New Haven: Yale, 1986), 79.

light shining out, awakens the faith of the one who recognizes it, a faith that draws the believer to Christ.

Through these very forms, the beauty and splendor emanating from within, along with the glory of the self-revealing God, find expression. This is what Balthasar has called the "aesthetic canon," the foundation of revelation and all theological aesthetics.

This aesthetic canon of revelation has its culminating point in the Incarnation of the Word where the eternal *Logos* has assumed the flesh or human form. For Balthasar, the Liturgy—through the Christmas Preface—beautifully expresses it: *Quia per incarnati Verbi mysterium nova mentis nostrae oculis lux tuae claritatis infulsit: ut dum visibiliter Deum cognoscimus, per hunc in invisibilium amorem rapiamur.*[9] This prayer speaks of two things:

1. To the "eyes of our mind" which are struck by a "new light" from God which then enables them to know visibly—contemplatively (*visibiliter*): an object which is actually "God," but God as "mediated" (*per*) by the "sacramental form" (*mysterium*) of the enfleshed word.
2. To a "mediating" (second *per*) vision that occasions a "rapture" and a "transport" (*rapiamur*) to an "eros-love" (*amor*) for those "things unseen" (*invisibilia*) which had announced themselves by appearing in the visibleness and revelation of the Incarnation.[10]

First, Balthasar emphasizes the act of seeing. The primary act is perception. It points to the "'taking to oneself' (nehmen)

9. *Because through the mystery of the incarnate Word the new light of your brightness has shone onto the eyes of our mind; that knowing God visibly, we might be snatched up by this into love of invisible things.* For the Latin text, see *GL1,* 119-120; English translation provided as footnote 50 on page 120.

10. *GLI*, 120.

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of something true (Wahres) which is offering itself."[11] This perceiving requires a new light but it must spring from the very reality seen and, to a certain extent, must be an internal part of it. Moreover, the act of seeing is presented because there is always something to know and understand. Seeing, understood as perception, implies grasping and understanding.[12] Therefore, despite the concealment of that very mystery, it signifies that "something is 'offered' to man by God, indeed offered in such a way that man can see it, understand it, make it his own, and live from it in keeping with his human nature."[13] It is a mystery that truly reveals itself.

From there, the second point shall be presented: the rapture. To speak of the rapture of the human being when they contemplate God and the eros or love that this implies supposes the manifestation of the light and love of the same perceived God. This rapture (or what some have called the aesthetic arrest) is a movement of one's entire being, provoked by that vision that takes the human person out of him/herself

11. *GLI*, 120. The German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer agrees with Balthasar saying that "to perceive is not purely to collect various sensory impressions, but to perceive means, as the German word *wahrnehmen* puts it so beautifully, 'to take (*nehmen*) something as true (*wahr*)." See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *La Actualidad de lo bello: El arte como juego, símbolo y fiesta* (Barcelona: Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona, 1991), 36. For his part, Balthasar exudes enthusiasm about this word: "one must possess a spiritual eye capable of perceiving (*wahrnehmen*) the forms of existence with awe. (What a word: 'Perception' [*Wahrnehmung*]! [which means] 'the seeing of what is true!')." (*GL1*, 20.) More importantly, for Balthasar, the importance of perception resides in its theological weight, since the *Logos* became flesh and therefore became perceptible to hearing, sight, and touch (cf. Jn 1:14; 1 Jn 1:1-3). Thus, the linguistic equivalence between aesthetics and perception has this theological weight: "*Aesthesis*, the act of perception, and *Aestheton*, the particular thing perceived (radiant love), together inform the object of theology" (Balthasar, *My Work,* 80).

12. Polanco*, Hans Urs von Balthasar I*, 144.

13. *GL1*, 113.

and leads him/her to God through Christ and moved by the Holy Spirit. Hence, faith is more than a mere response. It is a movement towards and participation in the light of God. In this movement, the aesthetic canon and, therefore, the core of Theological Aesthetics and its theological force have been defined.

This is why Balthasar's proposal is important. His is to recover an element that was fundamental to early Christianity and is now needed in today's world. In a world where the human person is not capable of contemplating and affirming beauty, the good also loses its attractive force and, in turn, truth lacks cogency and its demonstrative capacity.

Ganda: Sensitivity to the Filipino Concept of Beauty

In due part to the expressed aspiration of Balthasar for his theological vision to transcend cultural boundaries, that it might extend its reach to the diverse tapestry of Asian cultures, I now seek to present the ground for a potential correlation between Balthasar's theological aesthetics and our own Filipino culture, a correlation found in the term *ganda* and its variations.

Anyone delving into the study of Filipino aesthetics would discover the works of Filipino philosopher Leonardo Mercado as an exceptional starting point. His writings explore the essence of Filipino aesthetics from a philosophical perspective, addressing concepts such as duality and non-duality, meta-linguistic analysis, and more. Relevant to this is his idea that aesthetics can be grouped into two classes: the dualistic view and the non-dualistic view.

'Dualistic' means the viewer or subject is stressed as different from the viewed or object. This school of thought can be traced back to Greek philosophy which in turn influenced later

Western thinks [sic]. "Non-dualistic" means the difference between the subject and object is not stressed so that both are in communion. This school of thought is characteristic of Oriental philosophies such as that of India, China, and Japan.[14]

Mercado contends that "Filipino aesthetics belongs to the non-dualistic school."[15] Hence, it is clear that the distinction in Mercado's ideas centers around the relationship between the observer and the observed, the subject and the object. The "interchangeable" characteristic of the Filipino concept of beauty expressed in the word *ganda* with "good" will also be addressed. Mercado himself asserts that "good and beautiful are often synonymous."[16] Thus, this current paper will explore the idea that the Filipino concept of beauty is rooted in its "non-dualistic nature" and its inherent quality of interchangeability, its ability to encompass the transcendentals of being, namely, beauty, good, and true.

The above assertion aligns well with the perspective of Filipino theologian José de Mesa, who contends that the Filipino term *ganda* (1) implies deep subject-object relationship, and that it (2) extends beyond mere aesthetics. According to him, the Filipino concept of beauty "points to a connection between the perceiver and the perceived."[17] Moreover, it "can characterize the whole of life, a person, disposition, nature, or an object."[18] This means that the word *ganda* may serve as an inclusive expression of one's personhood. Because of its encompassing and interchangeable characteristics, it inherently

14. Mercado, *Applied Filipino Philosophy*, 1.

15. Mercado, *Applied Filipino Philosophy*, 1.

16. Mercado, *Applied Filipino Philosophy*, 9.

17. De Mesa, *When Beauty Beckons*, 37.

18. De Mesa, *When Beauty Beckons*, 18.

holds the power to articulate that which is beautiful, good, and true within the Filipino ethos.

In Filipino culture, a profound interconnection exists among physical appearance, emotions, thoughts, and behaviors, all intricately woven into the fabric of the concept of beauty. The term *maganda* in Filipino translates to beautiful, while *pangit* means bad, ugly, or unpleasant.[19] This duality of judgments seems to play a significant role in shaping the way Filipinos perceive and respond to various experiences. This cultural perspective implies that Filipinos may categorize their experiences along this spectrum of beauty and unpleasantness. It could influence how they approach situations, make decisions, or form opinions. The degree of beauty or the lack thereof in an experience may impact the overall perception of that experience. The concept of Filipino beauty is subject to the influences of time (history) and prevailing social conditions.[20] Despite this shifting landscape, *ganda* can consistently be defined as something orderly and simple.

Ganda has something to do with seeing. *Ganda* can be seen and many are the definitions and attributes that can be linked to it as an aesthetic experience. These definitions may vary depending on the fields (e.g., architecture, visual and performing arts, cosmetics, etc.) and the era (i.e., pre-colonialism, post-colonialism, or contemporary) one wishes to recount.

The first definition of *ganda* (or *kagandahan*) as elucidated by the *UP Diksiyonaryong Filipino* entails the "combination of characteristics such as shape, color, or form that is pleasing

19. De Mesa, *When Beauty Beckons*, 17.

20. Estela Padilla, "Ganda: Isang Pagtinging Kultural," in *Ang Maganda sa Teolohiya* (Quezon City: Claretian Communications Foundations, Inc., 2017), 31.

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to the aesthetic senses, especially the sight."[21] This definition highlights that *ganda* involves a combination of specific attributes. Beauty is not solely based on a single aspect but rather emerges from the harmonious interplay of various qualities. Moreover, it emphasizes that the resulting combination of characteristics should be aesthetically pleasing, particularly when perceived through the sense of sight.

What can be said about this? One can argue that *ganda* is the presence of *kaayusan* (order).[22] The Filipino sense of beauty frequently finds expression in orderliness. Order is important to Filipinos. When everything is perceived to be in the right place, it is considered *maganda*. In this context, de Mesa is keen in pointing out that the "*maayos* is also *mabuti.*"[23] The well-organized placement of elements, hinting at a sense of *maaliwalas* (spaciousness) is regarded as pleasing. Notably, cleanliness seems to play a role as an element contributing to what is considered "in order." Thus, beauty's opposite would be what is contrary to being neat and orderly: untidy, dirty, chaotic and unpleasant.[24]

However, the Filipino desire for order extends to more than just physical organization. It also implies *magandang samahan* (harmonious relationships) and *magandang buhay* (a well-ordered life) because, in the Filipino mindset, order is also used for status. Similarly, one could argue that the concept of 'order' is characterized by the absence of chaos, where individuals' needs are adequately met, and the community is

21. Virgilio S. Almario, ed., *UP Diksiyonaryong Filipino* (Quezon City: UP Sentro ng Wikang Filipino-Diliman, 2009), 386 (this author's translation to English).

22. Dionisio Miranda, *Buting Pinoy* (Manila: Logos Publications, 1992), 118.

23. De Mesa, *When Beauty Beckons*, 22.

24. Padilla, "Ganda," 32.

unified and cooperative, fostering a peaceful environment."[25] The Filipino concept of *maayos* thrives when individuals have a secure and fulfilling means of earning a living and when their basic necessities are fully met. The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines strongly validates this longstanding Filipino desire for such an order. "In the depths of the Filipino spirit is a longing for *kaayusan*, for order out of chaos, a longing for the life that the creative Spirit of Jesus gives as a gift, a gift which is likewise a challenge."[26] Filipinos inherently yearn for order which goes beyond physical orderliness. Their quest for order is a pursuit of harmony, stability, and a well-functioning society.

Moreover, *ganda* is not limited to physical and social order. It also favors the quality of being *payak* (simple). The Filipino concept of beauty often emphasizes natural and modest aesthetics, distinct from the wider range of descriptors found in the English language which encompasses terms like "graceful, delicate, exquisite, [and even] elegant."[27] There is a cultural appreciation for simplicity, humility, and authenticity. This emphasis on simplicity can be seen in various aspects, from fashion choices to architecture, even to one's way of life.

An emerging movement in the world of Filipino fashion "celebrates the elegance of simplicity" known as "Filipino minimalism."[28] In contemporary times, the word *simplicity* often goes by the term *minimalism*. What, then, is Filipino mini-

25. Padilla, "Ganda," 32. (this author's translation to English).

26. *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines*, no. 257.

27. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. (USA: Merriam-Webster Inc., 2009), 108.

28. Sean Castelo III, "Filipino Minimalism: Celebrating Simplicity and Culture in Fashion," *Mega,* June 30, 2023, accessed March 9, 2024, https://mega-onemega.com/filipino-minimalism-celebrating-simplicity-and-culture-in-fashon/.

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malism? It is fundamentally about simplifying and embracing a timeless sense of style. It values simplicity as an expression of elegance, demonstrating how less can be more. "It challenges the notion that elaborate designs and excessive embellishments are necessary for creating impactful looks," says Sean Castelo, "After all, simplicity can be striking, while restraint can be powerful."[29] The minimalist aesthetic draws inspiration from the captivating allure of Filipino culture.

In terms of architecture, the *bahay kubo* stands as the quintessential symbol of traditional Filipino architecture. The term *bahay kubo* derives from the Filipino word "*bahay*," meaning "house," and the Spanish word "*cubo*," meaning "cube." The *bahay kubo* features simple interiors made of natural materials including nipa, bamboo, and coconut leaves. This conveys the simplicity and reliance on natural resources that characterize the iconic Filipino dwelling. "Despite its simplicity, it has significant features that can be adapted by modern designs. Through application of these different features, one can obtain simplistic beauty and functionality."[30] It is not surprising that this very icon of simple dwelling also represents *payak na pamumuhay* (simple lifestyle). *Payak* is usually defined as *karaniwan at walang palamuti* (ordinary and unsophisticated).[31] But *payak* should not be seen as something elementary and undeveloped. Rather, it means the sheer act of just being itself; *to be* without complication and complexity.

To reiterate: in the Filipino mind, beauty is found in order. There is beauty when things fall in their places. The Filipino

29. Castello III, "Filipino Minimalism."

30. Marc Obero, "Bahay Kubo Features That Can Be Adapted Into Modern Design," *Constantin Design & Build*, December 10, 2020, accessed March 14, 2024, https://constantintegratedph.com/news/bahay-kubo-in-modern-design/.

31. Almario, ed., *UP Diksiyonaryong Filipino,* 955.

word for meaning or significance, "*kahulugan*," offers a fascinating glimpse into the cultural connection between order and beauty. *Kahulugan*, derived from the root verb "*hulóg*" (to fall) and noun "*húlog*" (plumb line),[32] can be taken to hold a deeper meaning that resonates with the Filipino concepts of beauty and order. It suggests that just as an object finds its purpose, sense, and stability when it "falls" into place or in the right spot, so too does beauty emerge when elements are arranged in a harmonious order. Furthermore, the concept of *kahulugan* implies that things only make sense when they are in their rightful places. This connection between order and meaning reinforces the Filipino belief that true beauty lies not just in aesthetics but in the inherent logic and purpose that arises when things land in their rightful places. Therefore, order becomes a fundamental principle of beauty itself. But as much as *ganda* is found in order, it is also found in the ordinariness, minimalism, and simplicity of one's life. Hence, *maganda ang maayos at payak.*

Convergence in Beauty: Balthasar's Theological Aesthetics and Filipino *Ganda*

Theological Aesthetics builds a Christian theology by considering the transcendental of beauty (pulchrum) as its most fundamental element.[33] It explores the fundamental components of beauty, focusing on what Thomas Aquinas referred to as form and splendor.[34] In his Theological Aesthetics, Balthasar

32. A string with a metal weight that goes vertically down to ensure accuracy. *UP Diksiyonaryong Filipino* defines the Filipino noun *húlog* as "*isang pabigat na nakapalawit sa pisi at tumitiyak kung tuwid ang pagkakatayô ng anumang bahagi ng bahay*" (a metal weight hanging on a rope used to ensure the straightness of the construction of any part of the house). See Almario, ed., *UP Diksiyonaryong Filipino,* 469 (this author's translation to English).

33. *GL1*, 14.

34. *GLI*, 18.

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expounds upon these two interlinked elements which he terms Gestalt und Glanz.

Balthasar uses the medieval word forma (form) and its related word formosa (beautiful) to embrace reflections on beauty from the Church Fathers. When he refers to Gestalt, he is attempting to invoke medieval ideas. As a result, when Thomas Aquinas articulates, at the height of the Middle Ages, that beauty demands integritas (integrity), consonantia (harmony), and claritas (radiance), he is speaking within a large and well-established tradition.[35] In the medieval context, the embodiment of the components that constitute beauty – integrity, harmony and radiance – is the forma. Beauty, therefore, harmonizes diverse elements into an internal unity, one that is inherently splendid –– a quality that captivates and inspires affection. As Balthasar puts it, "we are confronted simultaneously with both the figure and that which shines forth from the figure, making it into a worthy, a loveworthy thing."[36]

But how does it relate to the Filipino concept of ganda? Two points of convergence can be pointed out.

The first observes how Balthasar, heavily influenced by Thomas Aquinas, subscribes to the notion that beauty emerges at the intersection of three elements: integrity, harmony, and radiance.[37] In the convergence of these elements, beauty emerges. Further analysis reveals that harmony, one of the three elements, refers to the symmetry and blending of parts,[38] which aligns with the dictionary definition of *ganda*,

35. See Eco, *Art and Beauty*, 79.

36. *GL1*, 20.

37. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae Complete English Edition in Five Volumes*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros., 1948), I, q.39, a.8

38. See Eco, *Art and Beauty*, 26.

emphasizing the pleasing combination of characteristics such as shape, color, or form.[39] To ensure clarity, a few illustrative examples may be helpful. Consider the harmony of elements exemplified in stained glass windows, where colors and shapes seamlessly blend to create fascinating patterns that captivate the viewer. Similarly, consider harmony evident in the balanced composition of figures, shades, and flow of lines. In the context of sports, consider football, where harmony is displayed in the coordination and synchronization of movements. For instance, a beautifully executed kick that perfectly connects with a precise ball pass demonstrates harmony in action. It is the seamless integration of these individual elements that contributes to the overall aesthetic appeal and effectiveness of the play. This is why football is often celebrated as "the beautiful game." The splendor of goals scored in various ways – whether through free-kicks, open play, or skillfully outmaneuvering multiple defenders – adds to its allure. The artistry is not only in the goals but also in the build-up play: the seamless passes, the intricate link-ups between players, and the final, decisive shot into the net. The diverse techniques used to score – volleys, chips, lobs, and headers – further enhance its charm.[40] In the realm of music, harmony is evident in compositions in which different musical notes and chords blend richly to create a pleasing and melodious sound. For instance, the harmonious interplay of various instruments, each playing its part in perfect synchronization, exemplifies the concept of *consonantia*. Additionally, the synthesis of integrity, harmony, and radiance resonates with the Filipino appreciation for orderliness, where everything in its proper place is perceived as *maganda*.

39. Almario, ed., *UP Diksiyonaryong Filipino,* 386.

40. See "Explained: Why is football called the beautiful game?," *Goal*, April 14, 2020, accessed May 27, 2024, https://www.goal.com/en/news/explained-why-is-football-called-the-beautiful-game/16ayjoii69lor168ku0gwsd9vd.

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As already articulated, Filipinos find inherent value in orderly arrangements that evoke a feeling of spaciousness (*maaliwalas*), which they find inherently pleasing and *maganda*.

A second point of convergence refers to how Balthasar's Theological Aesthetics finds its foundation in the concept of *Gestalt*. This is referred to by Balthasar as the splendor, majesty, and glory of God. These are the words that ultimately try to express for him the beauty of God. But the *splendor* of this *Gestalt* finds its centrality in the Incarnation and especially in the cross, where this life of self-giving love is disfigured, humiliated, disgraced, and abandoned. God's magnificence shines forth in the extraordinary display of love, in which the Father sends the Son into the depths of divine abandonment to bring back the world to divine life. It is through self-sacrifice that the glory of God is most evident. The Incarnation follows a downward trajectory as the Son of God assumes human form, "taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (Phil 2:7, RSV). He willingly embraces human vulnerability, ultimately submitting to death, even death on a cross. The Son of God descends into humanity, descending further still into the depths of human suffering. The Crucified finds himself not only torn away from the men and women to whom he was sent but also from the Father who sent him: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27: 46; Mk 15: 34). It is on the cross, where conventional notions of beauty are conspicuously absent, that the glory and beauty of God are predominantly unveiled.

This paradox of the glory-beauty of the Crucified Lord resonates with the Filipino concept of *payak* (simplicity). In choosing to take on human form, Jesus embraced the simplicity and humility of human existence. This act of divine condescension embodies the beauty of simplicity, as it reveals God's glory

amid human frailty and vulnerability. Jesus' life and ministry exemplify this paradoxical beauty. He chose to dwell among the marginalized, the sinners, and the ordinary (Mt 9:10-17; Mk 2:15-22; Lk 5:29-39), embracing a lifestyle characterized by simplicity and humility. His teachings often centered on themes of humility, compassion, and service to others, reflecting the inherent beauty found in a life lived in harmony with God's will. Moreover, Jesus' ultimate act of love, his sacrificial death on the cross, epitomizes the paradox of the glory-beauty of the Lord. In the eyes of the world, the cross symbolizes weakness and defeat. Yet, through the eyes of faith, it reveals the depth of God's love and the transformative power of redemption. Christ's sacrificial love on the cross unveils the true glory of God's salvific plan for humanity. In Filipino spirituality, the concept of *maganda ang payak* underscores the profound truth that true beauty lies not in extravagance or opulence, but in simplicity and authenticity. This resonates with the theological understanding of how God's glory is often revealed in the ordinary and the humble.

In conclusion, the two points of convergence between Balthasar's theological aesthetics and the Filipino concept of *ganda* reveal a profound alignment between divine beauty and Filipino spirituality. The first point highlights the harmony between Balthasar's understanding of beauty as the convergence of integrity, harmony, and radiance, and the Filipino appreciation for *ganda* as the harmonious interplay of elements. Whether in art, sports, or music, this notion of beauty finds its resonance in the Filipino's value for *kaayusan at kaaliwalasan* (orderliness and pleasing arrangements). The second point focuses on the paradox of beauty revealed in the humility of Christ's Incarnation and sacrifice on the cross. In this, the Filipino concept of *payak* is reflected, as true beauty lies in simplicity and authenticity rather than grandeur. Both

these points illustrate that for both Balthasar and the Filipino understanding, beauty is not merely an aesthetic ideal but a reflection of deeper realities.

Poón and *Traslación*: An Exemplification of the Convergence of Balthasar's Theological Aesthetics and Filipino *Ganda*

The purpose of this work has always been to explore how Balthasar's Theological Aesthetics might converge with Filipino cultural and religious sensibilities. What better way to understand the faith of Filipino Catholics than by examining their faith expressions? Virginia Fabella puts it well when she writes that "the process should begin at the very roots of the people's religiosity that have been kept alive by popular religion."[41]

But how does the Black Nazarene devotion relate to Balthasarian theology? The Swiss theologian's emphasis on the Incarnation and the Paschal Mystery underscores the significance of Christ's tangible suffering and redemptive power. This view aligns perfectly with the Filipino Catholic sensibility as seen in the Black Nazarene devotion. As such, it serves as a crucial focal point for theological exploration in the Filipino context that provides a tangible manifestation of the faith held by numerous Filipino Catholics.[42] Consequently, Black Nazarene devotion can be seen as an illustrative example of the potential convergence between Balthasar's theological reflections and Filipino cultural and spiritual beliefs.

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41. Virginia Fabella, "Inculturating the Gospel: The Philippine Experience," in *The Way* 39: 2 (1999): 127.

42. Wilson Angelo Espiritu, "People's Mysticism and Political Engagement: The Prophetic Character of the Nazareno Image," *Academia*, accessed June 4, 2024, https://www.academia.edu/32493183/Peoples _Mysticism_and_Political_Engagement_The_Prophetic_Character_of_the_Nazareno_Image?email_work_card=title, 3.

In Filipino culture, the "holy" is considered deeply immanent in creation and people, and the "divine" is not grasped through the intellect alone. The immanent God, God-with-us, is a presence that is intimately felt.[43] In such a culture, external symbols such as physical images, objects, and gestures cannot be ignored. All these "provide ultimacy to the people, provide visual expression of what they believe and feel, and move them forward to dimensions of consciousness not directly accessible to discursive thought."[44] Consequently, one's theologizing should pay attention to these religious and cultural patterns.

Michael Amaladoss' concept of the symbol, coupled with Jannel Abogado's analysis of cultic representations of saints, serves as a particularly useful framework to deepen the understanding of how Balthasar's thought aligns with Filipino religious sensibilities.

Amaladoss eloquently articulates the pivotal role of symbols. For him,

> a symbol is useful only insofar as it leads us to go deeper into the reality that it symbolizes. It has played its role well when it makes us aware that the reality transcends it in its individuality and depth. The symbol then becomes an icon that leads us to the contemplation of the mystery it indicates.[45]

This means that symbols have transformative power. Symbols possess the ability to guide people beyond the surface

43. See Leonardo Mercado, "Inculturation and the Filipino Religious Experience," in *Roots of Filipino Spirituality*, ed. Teresita Obusan (Manila: Mamamathala, 1998) cited in Fabella, "Inculturating the Gospel," 126.

44. Benigno Beltran, *The Christology of the Inarticulate: An Inquiry into the Filipino Understanding of Jesus the Christ* (Manila: Divine Word Publications, 1987), 127.

45. Michael Amaladoss, *The Asian Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2006), 4-5.

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to the profound depths of the realities they represent. This is particularly relevant in the context of Filipino religiosity, where the tangible and the spiritual are inextricably intertwined, demanding a theology that acknowledges and engages with this symbolic dimension.

For his part, Jannel Abogado emphasizes the "incarnational" character of symbols, particularly within Filipino popular religiosity. In this framework, the symbol (or image) operates as an almost direct extension of the saint, creating a deep and incarnational connection.[46] Abogado notes that the saint becomes so closely identified "with the image itself, so much so that, when the image of the patron saint is stolen, they conjure that the town has been abandoned by the saint."[47]

In Balthasar's Theological Aesthetics, beauty is most fully revealed in the person of Christ, the *Gestalt*. As the *Gestalt* (or form), the synthesis of integrity, harmony, and radiance come together. This, in the Filipino mind, is understood as *maayos* and *maaliwalas*. Yet, paradoxically, this beauty is also concealed in the humility of the Incarnation and the Cross, regarded in the Filipino ethos as *payak*.

This convergence is particularly palpable in Filipino popular religiosity, which is deeply rooted in tangible expressions of faith, especially through physical symbols, gestures, and sacred images. Amaladoss underscores the role of symbols in leading people into the depths of the realities they signify. In a culture where the sacred and the secular are intertwined, external symbols become profound markers of faith, revealing how theological aesthetics can be lived out in daily practices.

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46. Jannel Abogado, "The Cult of Saints Among Filipino Catholics: A Study of Inculturation," in *Philippiniana Sacra* XLI: 123 (2006): 504.

47. Abogado, "The Cult of Saints Among Filipino Catholics": 504.

The *Poón*: Beauty in Simplicity

Without the Incarnation of the eternal Logos, the Trinitarian Mystery would not be known to humanity. It is from the descending mediation or descent of the eternal Son from the bosom of the Father that the world arrives at perceiving this mystery, which is well expressed in the pre-Pauline hymn of Phil 2:6-11—with its emphasis on the kenosis of the Incarnation and of the Cross. And this is only possible, ultimately, through the Son's obedience to the Father. The Incarnation is a dynamic event, one that is linked to the Cross. In short, the mystery of the Incarnation and Christ's death on the cross—understood, embodied, and "presented in terms of 'surrender,' 'obedience,' and 'mission'"[48]—form an inseparable union. In his reflection on the Easter Triduum, Balthasar asserts that the Incarnation is intrinsically directed towards the Passion.[49] The Incarnate Word, pierced on Calvary, reveals the Father's love, bestowed upon the world through Christ. Ultimately, it is the revelation of God's glory, seen through the love of Christ to the world.

The Black Nazarene devotion hinges on the icon of *Jesús Nazareno*, commonly referred to as the *Poón.* The Indian Jesuit Amaladoss, cited above, asserts that a symbol is valuable as it leads a person deeper into the reality it represents. For him, the ultimate role of a symbol is to guide the believer toward a contemplation of the mystery it indicates. This view underscores the idea that, while symbols are important, their primary function is to point beyond themselves to a greater, transcendent reality. Amaladoss's notion complements what Jannel Abogado says about the "incarnational" aspect of

48. John A. Berry, "Saved through the death of Christ on the cross: In the light of Hans Urs von Balthasar's theology," in *Melita Theologica* 61:1 (2010): 3.

49. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Myterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 11-48.

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symbols, particularly within the Filipino context. In this view, the symbol (image) is seen almost as an extension of the saint (in this case, of Jesus), allowing for an intimate and incarnational relationship.[50] It means that the saint is closely identified with the image itself.[51] This connection is vividly exemplified in the devotion to the Black Nazarene, in which devotees deeply sense that Jesus is Emmanuel, God-with-us, as they gaze upon *Jesús Nazareno.* Owing to this icon, a religious experience is possible because the *Poón* is a representation of Jesus, the Incarnate Word of God,[52] who is the *Gestalt* of the Father.

Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theological Aesthetics centers around the concept of *Gestalt*—a term he uses to describe the splendor, majesty, and glory of God. For Balthasar, this divine beauty is most profoundly revealed in the Incarnation and Crucifixion. In these pivotal moments, Christ fully reveals that he is the *pulchra imago*—the beautiful *eikon* (icon) of the Father, fully embodying the image of the One who sent him. As Balthasar rightly affirms, "Christ becomes for us the image that reveals the invisible God."[53] In biblical revelation, God's self-disclosure reaches its pinnacle in Jesus Christ.[54] Balthasar considers the Incarnation and the Cross as the highest moments of revelation in Jesus' life. Jesus' descent into human form and his ultimate sacrifice on the cross epitomize the beauty of self-giving love, in which God's glory is unveiled through humility, suffering, and vulnerability.

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50. Abogado, "The Cult of Saints Among Filipino Catholics: A Study of Inculturation," 504.

51. Abogado, "The Cult of Saints Among Filipino Catholics: A Study of Inculturation," 504.

52. Calano, "The Black Nazarene, Quiapo, and The Weak Philippine State," 169.

53. *GL1*, 22.

54. Nichols, *A Key to Balthasar*, 19.

This paradoxical beauty—true splendor revealed in the simplicity and suffering of Christ—finds resonance in the Filipino concept of *payak* (simplicity), a beauty often seen in the simplicity and authenticity of life. The expression *maganda ang payak* (simple is beautiful) captures this idea, emphasizing that the Filipino appreciation of beauty favors *payak* over extravagance and showiness. Jesus' life and ministry, characterized by humility, compassion, and service to others, embody this notion of beauty. Needless to say, Jesus' choice to live among the marginalized and his sacrificial death on the cross reflects a profound truth: God's glory is revealed in the ordinary and humble aspects of human existence.

The Black Nazarene is an illustrative example of how these theological and cultural worldviews intersect. In the icon of *Jesús Nazareno*, an exemplification of Balthasar's Theological Aesthetics and the Filipino concept of beauty coming together can be perceived.

The Eternal Logos assumed human flesh and became one with the common people. In this humble, downward trajectory, the beauty and glory of God is made known. It is for this reason that devotees see in the Black Nazarene, the Word-made-flesh born in a manger and crucified on a cross, a reflection of their own humble lives. The icon serves as a constant reminder that the God whom they approach with such devotion is not distant; rather, he shares in their sufferings.

Jesús Nazareno carries the cross. His terrible suffering is evident. But why does this icon of suffering hold such a strong appeal? Why would such a picture of immense suffering resonate deeply with many Filipinos? The devotees are drawn to the Black Nazarene because they see themselves in the suffering Jesus. This personal connection explains why the devotees are frequently criticized for "not moving beyond the Cross," as

if Jesus had not resurrected.[55] A focus on suffering highlights one fundamental aspect of Filipino spirituality: an intense identification with the Passion of Christ. It is not, however, an instance of valuing pain for its own sake. On the contrary, they see Jesus, the Black Nazarene, as an icon of hope.[56]

The *Poón* serves as a channel for transcendental and religious experiences, offering a tangible connection with the divine.[57] Moreover, the icon leads to an *eventus pulchri et Christi* in which "the event of the beautiful becomes a pointer to the event of Christ."[58] By gazing at the icon, one sees the Eternal Logos, Jesus Christ, who is the beautiful appearance of God in the flesh.

The *Traslación*: Beauty in Order

Traslación is a Spanish word that can be translated as "transfer" or "movement."Applied to the devotion to the Black Nazarene, it refers to the festive procession of the famous icon from the Rizal Park (or Luneta) to Quiapo, and this has occurred regularly since 2019. "It is a new tradition that commemorates the many transfers (*traslación*) of the image from Bagumbayan to Intramuros and finally to Quiapo."[59]

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55. See Bautista, "On the Anthropology and Theology of Roman Catholic Rituals," 147.

56. Lars Raymund Ubaldo confided in this writer how the icon of *Padre Jesús Nazareno* is truly perceived among his fellow devotees: *Jesús Nazareno* bears the cross, yet it seems as though He is rising beneath its weight. His suffering is evident, yet he rises from the fall, letting hope shine through.

57. See Calano, "The Black Nazarene, Quiapo, and The Weak Philippine State," 169. Also cited in Espiritu, "People's Mysticism and Political Engagement," 6-7.

58. *GL1*, 48.

59. For a more comprehensive historical account, see Chua and Ubaldo, "Limandaang Taon," 22.

The Black Nazarene devotion is generally regarded as tumultuous and even idolatrous by many "outsiders"—those who are not devotees , especially during the annual *Traslación*. From an outsider's viewpoint, "they resemble crabs stepping on each other to get into the carriage: disorderly, lacking unity, selfish, inconsiderate, chaotic, fanatical, and foolish."[60] An "orderly *Traslación*" appears to be an oxymoron, their peaceful coexistence seemingly impossible. This assessment is based on several basic features of this devotion.

First, during the yearly *Traslación* procession, hundreds of thousands of devotees feverishly touch or wipe handkerchiefs or towels on the Black Nazarene image, hoping to receive graces or miracles. To non-devotees, this intense veneration of a physical object may appear to promote idolatry, elevating the statue itself to a position of divine power, rather than focusing solely on the spiritual and symbolic significance it represents.

Second, the event's sheer scale and fervor add to its chaotic reputation. The parade through Manila's streets is accompanied by an impenetrable crowd of people, all vying for the best view of the statue. This frequently results in a frenzied environment in which there is a high risk of bodily harm owing to pushing, shoving , and, in some cases, stampeding. From an outsider's perspective, the lack of order and the possibility of bodily injury can overwhelm the devotion's spiritual aim, leading to the event being described as pandemonium.

Despite these negative perceptions, however, for the devotees the *Traslación* is a profound expression of their faith and communal solidarity, embodying their deep connection to Jesus Christ and their shared cultural and spiritual heritage. The devotion's seemingly topsy-turvy nature is, in fact, a testament to the intense and passionate faith of the devotees,

60. See Chua and Ubaldo, "Limandaang Taon," 25.

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who see their actions as acts of piety and faith rather than of disorder.

Devotees participate in the annual *Traslación* not only to present their petitions to Jesus but also to share in his suffering on the journey to Calvary; thus they often walk barefoot. Filled with hope, they see themselves as suffering alongside Jesus. Historian Reynaldo Ileto provides a compelling insight into this phenomenon. In his study, *Pasyon and Revolution*, Ileto suggests that the life of Jesus, particularly his suffering and death, serves as an inspiration rather than a hindrance for Filipinos.[61] The suffering Christ inspires them to strive in restoring freedom and social order.[62] Through this recognition and embrace of suffering, they find solidarity, inspiration, and a deeper appreciation for the promise of resurrection and the ultimate restoration of social *kaayusan* (order), which is another fundamental aspect of beauty in the Filipino mind. PCP II's aspiration is particularly apropos in this context: "In the depths of the Filipino spirit is a longing for *kaayusan*, for

61. See Chua and Ubaldo, "Limandaang Taon," 24.

62. Xiao Chua explains how Ileto used the three stages of Jesus' life – light (birth), darkness (death), and light again (Resurrection) – to interpret Philippine history. Ileto saw parallels between Jesus' life and the phases of Philippine history: the pre-colonial era (light), the colonial period (darkness), and independence (light). Ileto, therefore, believed that the order that the Philippine society once had would eventually be restored. See Xiao Chua, "Xiao Talks: Salya, Ang Traslacion ng Poong Hesus Nazareno bilang debosyon ng bayan," May 3, 2023 lecture, 1:10:13, https://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=C-Cxyc7NukDo (accessed May 29, 2024). For a more comprehensive explanation of this tripartite reading of Jesus' life and Philippine history, see Maria Luisa Camagay, "Reynaldo Clemena Ileto, Pasyon and Revolution, Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840-1910," in *Archipel* 23, (1982): 208-210, accessed July 3, 2024, https://www.persee.fr/doc/arch_0044-8613_1982_num_23_1_1738.

order out of chaos, a longing for the life that the creative Spirit of Jesus gives as a gift...."[63]

Surprisingly, even the chaotic performance of the *Traslación* recognizes physical *kaayusan*. In the apparent disorder, those who participate in this annual procession "[experience] the ordinary dynamics of this Christian spectacle, which most people brush aside as mere chaos and mayhem but which crowd control specialist Martin Aguda characterized as a 'synchronized choreographed craze'; discordant and erratic for the outsiders and onlookers, but systematic and life-giving for the participant devotees."[64] An anecdote from Kenan Gawaran is insightful:

> It took only a few moments for the enormous crowd to nearly push me back against the wall. It got harder to breathe, let alone move. When the man standing next to me noticed that elderly people, women, and children were at the back, almost squashed against the wall, he exclaimed, "*Kapatid, tumukod ka*!" Being a *tukod* is to use one's body as a strong post, almost like a human shield, to protect people in the rear from the overwhelming force of the throng in front. [...] "*O, isa! Dalawa! Tatlo –– abante*!" ("One! Two! Three –– push!"), cried the man next to me, and our human barrier responded with a unison push, allowing fresh air to penetrate the back, and giving more space to the elderly women and enabling mothers to lift their small children up to safety.[65]

In addition,

> there is a unique language and set of signals used by fellow devotees to communicate. The *Hijos* use this to guide the

63. *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines*, no. 257.

64. Kenan Gawaran, "Encountering Jesus Nazarene," in *The Windhover: The Philippine Jesuit Magazine* Year XXVI: vol. 1 (March 2024): 35.

65. Gawaran, "Encountering Jesus Nazarene," 35.

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> devotees in moving the procession forward. When the word "salya" is shouted, the devotees at the back run together to push the carriage with their bodies in unison ... to move or organize the flow of the procession.[66]

Both accounts give notice that, although the *Traslación* appears disorderly, there is, in fact, a rhythm and order that the devotees follow as they are led by the *Hijos del Nazareno*.[67]

Taláb: Concluding Insights

Indifference is not an acceptable response to something beautiful. In the Filipino understanding, when an object, a person, or even an experience is described as beautiful, it possesses *taláb*—a resonance that penetrates deeply and moves the observer. This resonance stirs the subject, leaving a lasting imprint that goes beyond mere admiration. Beauty in this sense defies reduction to a simple formula or perspective; it demands immersion and engagement. This process invites the subject into what Balthasar calls a *symphonic truth*,[68] where different harmonies come together to form a cohesive whole. This resonance, akin to *taláb*, stirs the viewer from within, creating a narrative that speaks to both the intellect and the heart. It transcends metaphor and touches the deepest aspects

66. Chua and Ubaldo, "Limandaang Taon," 26 (this author's translation).

67. The *Hijos del Nazareno* is a group accredited by and based in Quiapo Church. There are different clusters of this group coming from different places. For more details, see Chua and Ubaldo, "Limandaang Taon," 25; and Mark Iñigo Tallara, "Understanding Catholicism in a Shared Space for Religious Practices: An Analysis of Performing Sacred Vow to Nuestro Padre Jesus Nazareno of Quiapo," in *Black Nazarene: Devotion and Discourse*, eds. Roberto Ampil, Jeanette Grajo and Luciana Urquiola, *Nazareno Studies* 1, no. 1 (March 2022), 52-3.

68. Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Qué le debo a Goethe," in *Hans Urs von Balthasar: El Drama del Amor Divino*, ed. Alberto Espezel (Buenos Aires: Almagesto, 1993), 74.

of human existence. Similarly, *ganda* within the Filipino ethos enables a person to experience beauty, goodness, and truth, and in doing so, invites a response.[69] A person captivated by beauty is moved to act and cannot remain detached. There is always an invitation from the object of contemplation for a transformative response from the observer.[70]

This profound sense of *taláb* is vividly manifested in the Black Nazarene devotion. The *Poón* of *Nuestro Padre Jesús Nazareno* does more than evoke admiration or reverence; it compels active participation, moving devotees to respond in transformative ways. The physical act of devotion—whether through touching the image, joining the *Traslación*, or enduring physical discomfort in the crowd—is a testament to the *taláb* of the icon, which resonates deeply within the Filipino faithful. The *Poón* becomes a visible and tangible representation of beauty rooted in simplicity, suffering, and humility. This resonance mirrors the mission of beauty in Balthasar's framework: it does not merely reveal the truth but also invites a response that leads to personal and communal transformation.

The *Traslación* further reveals the interplay. Beyond the spectacle, the devotion embodies the Filipino desire for *kaayusan*—harmony and order—both socially and spiritually. The purposeful movement of devotees striving to touch the icon reflects a collective aspiration for healing and hope. This is beauty that calls for action, a *taláb* that resonates with the Filipino ethos of communal solidarity and faith.

In this convergence, the devotion to the Black Nazarene exemplifies how Balthasar's aesthetics and the Filipino understanding of beauty intersect, offering a powerful testament to the transformative and transcendent power of beauty that

69. Jocano, *Filipino Worldview*, 135-6.

70. Belita, "Value-Driven," 68.

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moves, stirs, and ultimately calls for a response. After all, this aesthetic is "the beauty of a dramatic action."[71] To perceive the beautiful and glorious revelation of God calls for commitment on the part of humanity.

71. Nichols, *A Key to Balthasar*, 49.