LOYOLA PAPERS

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CONTENTS

LOYOLA PAPERS
Vol. 6, No. 1 (2025)

EDITOR'S PREFACE

ARTICLES

1 **Theology and Ministry in Asia: Insights from the Synod on Synodality 1**
Most Rev. Giovanni Cesare Pagazzi, D.D.

2 **A Critical Re-Examination of Karl Rahner's *Grundaxiom*: The Axiomatic Unity of the "Economic" and "Immanent" Trinity 13**
Salvador G. Agualada Jr., C.M.F.

3 **Intersecting Paths: Balthasar's Theological Aesthetics and Filipino *Ganda* in the *Poón* and *Traslación* *31***
Rheadh R. Dela Torre

4 **The Relationship Between the Catholic Church and the State in Vietnam: A Journey Towards Justice, Charity, and Faith 61**
Dao Duc Minh, O.M.I.

5 **Ukrainian Internally Displaced Persons and Their Journey of Christian Hope 83**
Pamela A. Tuason, C.C.N.

6 **Environmental Costs of the West Philippine Sea Dispute in Light of Catholic Social Teaching 111**
Teofilo Giovan S. Pugeda III

7 "Prudent Cooperators of the Episcopal College" (*Lumen Gentium* 28): An Understanding of the Promise of Obedience in the Rite of Ordination to the Presbyterate 149
Cris Simon B. Abadilla

8 Negotiating Theological Meaning in Contemporary Film 175
Shimbo Pastory William, C.S.Sp.

BACCALAUREATE IN SACRED THEOLOGY SYNTHESIS PAPER

1 Divine Communication in the Digital Era: A Theological Reflection on Authentic Presence and Evangelization 207
Septian Marhenanto, S.J.

CONTRIBUTORS **221**

EDITOR'S PREFACE

The final days of January 2025 were days of grace for Loyola School of Theology as it celebrated the silver jubilee of its establishment as an ecclesiastical faculty of theology. Adding to the solemnity and significance of the occasion, the Secretary of the Vatican's Dicastery for Culture and Education, Archbishop Giovanni Cesare Pagazzi, D.D., graced the week-long festivities with his presence. His participation affirmed and strengthened the bonds between the Holy See and LST as partners in the mission of theological and pastoral formation, forming learned scholars and ministers at the service of the Church, especially here in Asia.

In his address, the Archbishop underscored the vital role of dialogue in the life of the Church today, emphasizing its necessity both *ad intra*—within the ecclesial community—and *ad extra*—in our engagement with the wider world. He framed dialogue not merely as a strategy, but as a constitutive dimension of the Church's identity, especially as we strive to walk along the path of synodality. The archbishop warned that "the theologian who does not dialogue certainly loses the opportunity to understand the meaning and effectiveness of what he has studied and written at his desk." Without meaningful engagement with others—especially those on the peripheries of faith, culture, and society—academic theology risks becoming insular, disconnected from the lived realities of the faithful.

This message powerfully resonates with the challenge issued by Pope Francis in the Preface to *Veritatis Gaudium*, the Apostolic Constitution guiding ecclesiastical faculties and institutes of higher learning. There, the Holy Father insists that the cries and questions of the people—their suffering,

struggles, dreams, trials, and anxieties—are not peripheral to theological inquiry, but rather possess a profound interpretative value. "If we want to take the principle of the Incarnation seriously," Pope Francis writes, "we cannot ignore these questions." Indeed, he adds, "their wondering helps us to wonder ourselves, their questions question us. All this helps us to delve into the mystery of the Word of God, the Word that requires and asks that we dialogue, that we enter into communion" (6). Theology, then, is not simply about abstract speculation but about a shared search for truth grounded in attentive listening and mutual openness—hallmarks of a truly synodal Church.

For the theologian's work to bear true fruit—fruit that nourishes the life of the Church and the world—it must be grounded in various forms of dialogue. These dialogues are not optional add-ons but essential dimensions of a theology that is alive, dynamic, and responsive to the signs of the times. First and foremost is dialogue with God in prayer, where the theologian listens in silence and awe to the Mystery that is both beyond and intimately within us. Then comes dialogue with the people, whose lived experiences and questions offer a vast and indispensable context for theological reflection. Equally vital is dialogue with other academic disciplines, which can deepen and challenge theology's insights, and dialogue with other religions, which, particularly in our Asian context, opens paths of mutual respect, understanding, and shared spiritual wisdom.

Most especially in the context of the Philippines, there is a pressing need for dialogue with the poor, the marginalized, and the forgotten of society whose very lives reveal the scandal of injustice as well as the hope that boldly springs from resilience and faith. Their voices are not merely subjects for theological investigation and analysis; they are theological loci in

themselves, offering incomparable glimpses into the suffering Christ and the liberating work of the Holy Spirit.

In the midst of these complex and sometimes daunting tasks that comprise dialogue, the Archbishop's message offers words of encouragement and comfort. He reminds us not to fear conflict or tension when it arises, but to embrace it as an opportunity for deeper understanding and communal growth. "Synodality is built from dialogue," he says—underscoring that every sincere attempt to listen and understand is not only a step that brings us closer to the truth but also a step that draws us closer to one another in love. In this way, theological dialogue becomes not just an intellectual exercise, but a spiritual and ecclesial journey of walking together, guided by the Spirit of Love who leads us into all truth.

In this issue of *Loyola Papers*, we are happy to share with you the full text of the address of Archbishop Pagazzi so we can continue to reflect on his message as one community. We are also proud to feature the following articles as fruits of the continuing efforts of our students and alumni to engage in various forms of meaningful theological dialogue.

The first paper, "A Critical Re-Examination of Karl Rahner's *Grundaxiom*: The Axiomatic Unity of the 'Economic' and 'Immanent' Trinity" by **Fr. Salvador G. Agualada Jr., C.M.F.** offers a well nuanced and rigorous critique of Karl Rahner's theological *Grundaxiom*—the foundational axiom asserting that "the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and vice versa." Drawing from historical, philosophical, and doctrinal foundations, the author questions the coherence and implications of Rahner's *grundaxiom*, suggesting that it may potentially risk conflating God's inner life with His self-revelation in history or what theologians often term as "the economy of salvation." His critique revisits traditional Trinitarian distinctions, arguing

that Rahner's position—while pastorally motivated—may inadvertently collapse the mystery of divine transcendence into human categories of experience. Scholars and students alike will find in this essay a well-argued appeal for preserving the ontological mystery of the Trinity without reducing it to its temporal manifestation. In the context of dialogue, Agualada's treatment exemplifies the delicate balance between doctrinal clarity and rootedness in human experience amid tendencies in some current theologies to prioritize existential over metaphysical truths.

In "Intersecting Paths: Balthasar's Theological Aesthetics and Filipino *Ganda* in the *Poón* and *Traslación*," **Rheadh R. Dela Torre** explores the convergence of Hans Urs von Balthasar's theological aesthetics with Filipino religious culture, particularly through the lens of the *Poón* (sacred image) and *Traslación* (January 9 annual procession) of the Black Nazarene (now officially referred to as Jesus Nazarene, as per a recent instruction from the Quiapo Basilica). The article delves into Balthasar's vision of the transcendent revealed through beauty and applies it to the Filipino experience of faith embodied in this popular devotion. By presenting *Ganda*—the Filipino notion of beauty—as a lived, relational, and often affective expression of the divine, the author opens a dialogue between Western theological traditions and vernacular Filipino spirituality. This article is a significant contribution to contextual theology, as it not only affirms indigenous religious expression but also challenges academic theology to remain rooted in the sensory, symbolic, and communal realities of the people—a particular area of theological conversation so dear to Pope Francis.

The following article titled, "The Relationship between the Catholic Church and the State in Vietnam: A Journey Towards Justice, Charity, and Faith" by **Fr. Dao Duc Minh, O.M.I.**,

provides a historical and critical examination of the evolving relationship between the Catholic Church and the State in Vietnam. Here, he traces how the local Church has navigated varying degrees of autonomy, repression, and negotiation under different governments, highlighting its resilience and adaptability as it strives to journey with the Vietnamese people, including their governments, through the various transitions as a people throughout their history, in the spirit of synodality. The article is particularly relevant in understanding the complex interplay between religion and governance, offering valuable insights for scholars of Church-state relations and religious freedom. At the same time, it documents a remarkable experience of a local Church in Asia living in actual dialogue of life with the people and their concrete realities.

In "Ukrainian Internally Displaced Persons and Their Journey of Christian Hope," **Sr. Pamela A. Tuason, C.C.N.** explores the stories of eighteen Ukrainian individuals displaced by the ongoing war, presenting their narratives as a unique *locus theologicus*. Framed through a Ricoeurian hermeneutic, the article thoughtfully examines how these internally displaced persons confront the trauma, dislocation, and uncertainty of war, while simultaneously nurturing emotional, moral, and spiritual bonds across the boundaries of exile and origin. In the midst of loss and fragmentation, what emerges is a fragile yet valiantly enduring Christian hope—one that is rooted in community, faith, and the human capacity to find meaning in suffering. Tuason's work not only sheds light on the often-overlooked realities of internal displacement but also invites deeper theological reflection on the presence of God in spaces of crisis.

In "Environmental Costs of the West Philippine Sea Dispute in Light of Catholic Social Teaching," **Teofilo Giovan S. Pugeda III**

offers a moral analysis of the West Philippine Sea situation in light of Pope Francis' encyclical, *Laudato Si'*. In this reflection, the author reframes the dispute, not merely as a political or territorial conflict but as an urgent ecological and ethical issue. Drawing from Catholic Social Teaching, he emphasizes the moral responsibility of all stakeholders and calls for proactive, restorative action rooted in compassion and justice. The paper also critiques the limitations of existing international frameworks, such as UNCLOS, in fully capturing the intrinsic value of creation and argues for a broader, creation-inclusive application of ethical principles in ecological crises. Ultimately, the paper underscores that solidarity, compassion, and ecological stewardship must extend beyond human-to-human relations and calls for dialogue and collaboration, even with geopolitical rivals, to preserve and protect the shared gifts of creation. This article is a vital theological and ethical intervention into current policy conversations surrounding the West Philippine Sea, offering a framework where care for creation becomes central to peace and diplomacy.

Next we have "Prudent Cooperators of the Episcopal College" (*Lumen Gentium* 28): An Understanding of the Promise of Obedience in the Rite of Ordination to the Presbyterate" by **Cris Simon B. Abadilla**. His theological reflection on obedience, grounded on a mystagogy of the Ordination Rite, reclaims its meaning as a profound gift rather than a repressive constraint. The article underscores that obedience, far from being a form of blind submission, is a liberating act that aligns the presbyter's entire life with the mission of Christ—preaching, sanctifying, and governing. Drawing from the teachings of the Second Vatican Council and the insights of Pope Francis, Abadilla frames obedience as a reciprocal relationship grounded in trust, communion, and shared mission between bishops and presbyters. Thus, rather than a hierarchical

imposition, obedience becomes a dynamic of cooperation where bishops act as fathers and friends, and presbyters as faithful co-workers. This theological and pastoral vision calls for mutual listening and discernment, emphasizing the crucial role of the presbyteral council as a vital space for authentic dialogue. In an age where clerical relationships can often be strained or misunderstood, this reflection is truly relevant, inviting a deeper appreciation of obedience as a cornerstone of ecclesial unity and vitality.

Last but not the least, it is our pleasure to feature **Shimbo Pastory William, C.S.Sp.**'s "Negotiating Theological Meaning in Contemporary Film" where he explores the theological resonance of salvation as portrayed in contemporary films, calling for a discerning Christian response. Shimbo highlights how film narratives—often structured around themes of suffering, redemption, and the triumph of good over evil—mirror the salvific journey central to Christian faith. Drawing from both theological insight and media theory, the article demonstrates that while secular films often distort or marginalize Gospel values, they can also open spaces for dialogue, evangelization, and introspection. Theologically, this underscores the importance of *dialogue* between media and theology, culture and faith, between individual conscience and communal values, and ultimately between the Church and the world. The author emphasizes the need for media literacy, particularly among young believers, to cultivate critical engagement and safeguard the integrity of faith amid pervasive anti-Christian narratives. With a synodal spirit, this work affirms that the faithful must not only interpret and critique but also contribute to the evolving cultural discourse, embodying the Gospel through a discerning, hope-filled witness in the media age.

For this issue's synthesis paper, we are pleased to feature **Septian Marhenanto, S.J.**'s "Divine Communication in the

Digital Era: A Theological Reflection on Authentic Presence and Evangelization" which centers on how divine communication—rooted in God's desire for relationship—is revealed across salvation history and culminates in the person of Christ. In our contemporary digital age, communication offers both immense possibilities and pressing challenges. While technology enables unprecedented connection, it can also contribute to isolation and the spread of misinformation. Yet, as Marhenanto insightfully reminds us, grace—like sin—has a social dimension, and through the intentional, faithful use of digital tools, the faithful can continue to share God's presence in new and powerful ways. As we accompany the digitally native Beta Generation, we are challenged to ensure that the message of Christ remains both personal and transformative, fostering genuine encounters with the Divine in both digital and physical spaces.

* * *

In the most recent Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings by Subject, released in March 2025, Ateneo de Manila University once again earned recognition among the world's top universities for Theology, Divinity, and Religious Studies—placing in the 101–150 bracket out of 1,747 institutions globally. This marks the second consecutive year that Ateneo has secured this distinction, remaining the only Philippine university to be included in the category. Just two months after celebrating its Silver Jubilee as an ecclesiastical faculty of theology, this milestone serves not only as a moment of affirmation but also as a moment of challenge for Loyola School of Theology to deepen its commitment to rigorous, relevant, and transformative theological dialogue.

In an age marked by unprecedented complexity, social fragmentation, and rapidly evolving cultural and technological

landscapes, theology cannot afford to be static, insular, or disengaged. Rather, it must rise to the occasion—faithfully rooted in the depth and wisdom of its tradition, while also boldly and critically engaging with the urgent questions, moral dilemmas, and lived realities of our time. Theological reflection today must be dynamic, dialogical, and discerning, serving not only the Church but also the broader human community in its search for meaning, justice, and hope. This demands a theology that listens attentively to the signs of the times and responds with intellectual rigor, pastoral sensitivity, and prophetic imagination.

May our recent jubilee celebration and this global recognition renew us in our mission—not only to form competent and compassionate pastors, theologians, and ministers, but also to cultivate a dynamic, contextual, and prophetic theological voice. Such a voice is urgently needed today—one that speaks with integrity to the heart of the Church while contributing meaningfully to broader global conversations on justice, peace, human dignity, and the future of faith in our digital, diverse, and deeply interconnected world—*ad majorem Dei gloriam*.

Leo-Martin Angelo R. Ocampo, O.P.

ARTICLES

THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY IN ASIA: INSIGHTS FROM THE SYNOD ON SYNODALITY

Address of His Grace Msgr. Giovanni Cesare Pagazzi, D.D.
Secretary of the Dicastery for Culture and Education at the Academic Convocation in Celebration of LST's Silver Anniversary as an Ecclesiastical Faculty
29 January 2025

Good Afternoon, everyone.

I have been asked to reflect with you on the teachings of the recent *Synod on Synodality* and how they might assist theology in Asia. While this task is undoubtedly a challenge, I will do my best to offer some insights on the matter.

I would like to begin with a re-reading of some aspects that characterize the stories of the two disciples of Emmaus in Luke, and of the meeting of the Apostles in Jerusalem, that is, the assembly or the so-called Council, narrated in the *Acts of the Apostles*. In this regard, a Spanish theologian recently identified some moments or aspects common to these two stories. They are:

1) ***Movement*** (The disciples walk towards Emmaus/The Apostles towards Jerusalem);
2) ***Encounter*** (The disciples meet the stranger/The Apostles meet each other with great differences);
3) ***Conflict*** (The disciples, in their hearts, do not accept the sacrifice of Jesus/The Apostles are torn between Judaizing and pagan customs);

4) ***Agreement and Amazement*** (The disciples around Jesus/The Apostles around the Holy Spirit).

In his meeting with the bishops of Asia, Pope Francis confessed that there is something that the latest Synod could recommend to Asian theologians and that is, above all, to strengthen and propose new forms of dialogue *ad intra* and *ad extra*. In fact, the Holy Father said to your bishops: "Dialogue is an essential part of the mission of the Church in Asia, [therefore] the Church is called to be versatile and creative in her witness to the Gospel through dialogue and openness to all."[1]

I, therefore, invite you to delve into the great challenge of dialogue, taking into account the four aspects of the stories that I have described for you and the conclusions of the 2024 Synod.

Movement

In *De modo orandi corporaliter Sancti Dominici*, a medieval writing by an unknown friar, it is affirmed that not only does the soul move the body, but that the body can also move the soul: *"ut anima movens corpus removeretur a corpore."* This reminds us that when a human being moves, it is not merely an expression of life, but also a means of transcending through movement. Man and woman, in their essential totality, move to perform primary gestures essential for survival and growth. In the same way, through movement, they can make their union with the Creator more transparent. It is therefore of vital importance that the theologian not focus exclusively on primary gestures—such as research, teaching, and publication—but, above all, that she or he does theology to transcend, to "reach the places where new narratives and paradigms are being formed" (*Veritatis Gaudium,* n. 4b).

1. Pope Francis, *Address to the Bishops of Asia*, 17 August 2014.

Having said this—and emphasizing that the movement made by the two disciples of Emmaus and the Apostles toward Jerusalem is, first and foremost, *walking*—I wish to highlight that the movement that should distinguish every theologian of Asia and the world is that of walking: going out, going further, leaving one's *comfort zone*, and entering *zones of risk* to draw close to others and offer responses grounded in the science of God.

Since the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Francis has consistently called us to become a *church that goes out*. He has expressed this appeal in nearly all his speeches, and in many different ways. It seems that, guided by the Spirit, the Pontiff is urging us to awaken from the lethargy that too often weighs down both Christians and theologians. To be a theologian who goes out means, above all, to move, to walk while knowing that the guiding compass is always, and without a doubt, the foundational criterion of *Veritatis Gaudium*.

Regarding the latter, an Italian theologian defined the first criterion of *Veritatis Gaudium* as concentration and integrality. He explains that it involves understanding the commitment of the theologian—both existentially and intellectually—starting from the radiating center of the *kerygma*. In other words, all theological research and reflection must be rooted in a principle that, both existentially and intellectually, integrates the original and defining dimensions of personal and social being, in a way that takes into account the totality of God and the human person in relation to God.

Recently, Pope Francis emphasized the primary importance of viewing the totality of a person when approaching the figure of a saint. Allow me to share his words: "To recognize the word that the Lord wishes to speak to us through one of his saints, we do not need to get caught up in details

[...]. What we need to contemplate is the totality of their life, their entire journey of growth in holiness, the reflection of Jesus Christ that emerges when we grasp their overall meaning as a person."[2] Thus, the first criterion of *Veritatis Gaudium* asks us to embrace the totality of the human person, as "in the deepening of the kerygma is becoming flesh more and more and better, which never ceases to illuminate the commitment [of the theologian], and which allows us to understand adequately the meaning of any theme that develops" (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium,* n. 165).

The first commitment outlined in the "Foreword" of *Veritatis Gaudium*, in concrete terms, is to promote universities and higher institutes of ecclesiastical studies as places and paths of formation, study, and research that are truly habitable and meaningful. These institutions must be marked by two inseparable objectives: on the one hand, an existential and intellectual immersion in the Christian experience—living the faith in practice, including its cultural implications, especially in the peripheries; and on the other, the acquisition of the skills necessary to weave meaningful social relationships at all levels, starting from the conviction that God, in Christ, desires not only the good of the individual but of society as a whole.

To move, then, is not merely to conform by seeing the Gospel as a normative witness, but also, to recognize its ongoing incarnation—historically and culturally—as it becomes flesh "more and more and better" in the life of the Church and of humanity. Walking together means encouraging the mystique of us, a shared spirit which becomes the leaven of universal fraternity.

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2. Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation Gaudete et Exsultate,* March 19, 2018.

Encounter

In Saint Luke's accounts concerning Emmaus and Jerusalem, the movement "ends" with a meeting: the two disciples with the stranger, and the Apostles with each other in the great assembly. This reminds us that—although we may be theologians who go out—we must, above all, speak with those we have met and foster the beautiful gift of dialogue. "Truth is *lógos* which creates *diá-logos*, and hence communication and communion," as Pope Benedict XVI said (cf. *Caritas in Veritate*, n.4).

Dialogue, in *Veritatis Gaudium*, is decisively presented, to avoid misunderstandings and inappropriate preconceived resistance, as "an intrinsic requirement for experiencing in community the joy of the Truth and appreciating more fully its meaning and practical implications" (n. 4b).

A theologian who does not dialogue certainly loses the opportunity to understand the meaning and effectiveness of what he has studied and written at his desk. Without dialogue, he cannot witness how knowledge moves from theory to lived experience—from the desk to the person. In this regard, Pope Francis' words can be enlightening, showing us a way to meet the person and the people. The Pontiff says:

> The first thing to do [...] is to heal from simplification. Reality is complex; challenges are varied; history is full of beauty and at the same time marred by evil. When someone cannot or does not want to deal with its dramatic complexity, then he or she easily tends to simplify. Simplification, however, mutilates reality; it gives rise to empty and unilateral thinking and it generates polarization and fragmentation.[3]
>
> In short, there is no dialogue.

3. Pope Francis, *Address to the Participants at the International Congress on the Future of Theology*, 9 December 2024.

Another thing necessary to promote dialogue is "to review, from this standpoint and in this spirit, the structure and method of the academic curricula proposed by the system of ecclesiastical studies, in their theological foundations, in their guiding principles and their various levels of disciplinary, pedagogical and didactical organization" (cf. "Foreword," n. 4b). From the perspective of the new evangelizing stage of the Church, the "cultural laboratory," represented by ecclesiastical studies, is strongly urged to offer an evangelically relevant and historically incisive contribution to the creation of that "culture of encounter between authentic and vital cultures" which elaborates from within, with evident *chiaroscuro*, today's story. If this decisive criterion is not taken into account, [any dialogue with reality] is illusory (cf. "Foreword," n. 4b).

Pope Francis provided three fundamental guidelines to help dialogue, namely *"the duty to respect one's own identity and that of others, the courage to accept differences, and sincerity of intentions.* The duty to respect one's own identity and that of others, because true dialogue cannot be built on ambiguity or a willingness to sacrifice some good for the sake of pleasing others. *The courage to accept differences,* because those who are different, either culturally or religiously, should not be seen or treated as enemies, but rather welcomed as fellow-travelers, in the genuine conviction that the good of each resides in the good of all. *The sincerity of intentions,* because dialogue, as an authentic expression of our humanity, is not a strategy for achieving specific goals, but rather a path to truth, one that deserves to be undertaken patiently, in order to transform competition into cooperation."[4]

4. Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Identity of Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue*, 25 January 2022, n.30.

In this sense, the *Final Document of the Synod* stated, that "The dialogue, the encounter and the exchange of gifts typical of a synodal Church are called to open up to relationships with other religious traditions, with the aim of establishing friendship, peace, harmony and sharing moral and spiritual values and experiences in a spirit of truth and love" (n. 41).

Conflict

Whenever there is dialogue between two individuals or parties, conflict is almost inevitable. Sometimes, these are merely formal things that can be resolved quickly; other times, they concern deeper issues of content, thus generating more serious tensions. An indispensable principle for building social friendship is that *unity is superior to conflict*. Pope Francis pointed out that "This is not to opt for a kind of syncretism, or for the absorption of one into the other, but rather for a resolution which takes place on a higher plane and preserves what is valid and useful on both sides" (*Fratelli Tutti*, n. 245).

Therefore, a theologian must not be afraid of conflict, nor must he escape it when it occurs during dialogue. Conflict, when approached constructively, can help both sides grow and offers an opportunity to strengthen unity, not uniformity.

When conflict arises, some people simply look at it and go their way as if nothing happened; they wash their hands of it and get on with their lives. Others embrace it in such a way that they become its prisoners; they lose their bearings, project onto institutions their own confusion and dissatisfaction and thus make unity impossible. But there is also a third way, and it is the best way to deal with conflict. It is the willingness to face conflict head-on, to resolve it, and to make it a link in the chain of a new process (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 227).

That said, there are two types of conflict that, sometimes, drag down even our theologians. The first is the product of those voices that do not share our faith and our choices. Do you remember the biblical story, in the second book of Samuel, when David was fleeing from Absalom and, having reached the city of Bacurim, a man of the same family as the house of Saul came out, called Shimei, son of Gera. He cursed David, shouting: "Get out, get out, you man of blood, you worthless man! [...]. The Lord has given the kingdom into the hand of your son Absalom. See, your evil is on you, for you are a man of blood." David's response to such imprecations still amazes us today. The King, when one of his men proposed to kill Shimei, said: "Let him curse, for the Lord has told him to. It may be that the Lord will look on the wrong done to me and that the Lord will repay me with good for his cursing today" (2 Sam 16:5-14).

Indeed, today there is no shortage of criticism or misunderstanding. In many countries, theology does not enjoy state and academic recognition as a science. Across the globe, some thinkers continue to denigrate any attempt by theology to answer the essential questions of the human person and of humanity. What should we do? Surely, following David's example, we must listen to our detractors and honestly ask ourselves to what extent our theological reflection—while respecting its own scientific method—responds to the needs of both society and the church. We cannot be afraid. Perhaps the Spirit wants to tell us something for the sake of theological research itself.

The *second conflict* theologians must confront is the growing divide among themselves—particularly between those who remain excessively self-referential or rigidly attached to a singular, exclusive way of doing theology, and those who have embraced Pope Francis' call to engage theology in dialogue with other human and scientific disciplines. The latter group

seeks to integrate theology with key aspects of culture, literature, music, art, and more, enriching theological reflection through interdisciplinary openness. It is worth remembering that the sole—but stimulating and guiding— indication offered in *Veritatis Gaudium's* "Foreword" concerns the interpretation and use of the principle of interdisciplinarity. This principle is not to be understood in its "weak form of simple multidisciplinarity"—essentially a horizontal approach—but rather in its "strong form of transdisciplinarity," that is, the collocation and fermentation of all knowledge within the space of Light and Life, offered by the Wisdom of the Revelation of God." This vertical perspective is both open and founded in making the transcendence of God in human history through Christ (cf. *Veritatis Gaudium*, n. 4c).

The final document of the Synod specified that "ecclesial synodality, therefore, commits theologians to do theology in synodal form, promoting among themselves the ability to listen, dialogue, discern and integrate the multiplicity and variety of requests and contributions" (n. 67). I invite you not to be afraid of transdisciplinarity.

Agreement and Amazement

The story of Emmaus reveals the moment of agreement between Jesus—no longer a stranger—and the two disciples, culminating in their astonishment at recognizing him in the breaking of bread. Similarly, the account of the Apostles in Jerusalem highlights a final decision made after dialogue, and the shared amazement of feeling guided by the Holy Spirit. As the most recent Synod affirmed, such agreement is reached "in prayer and fraternal dialogue, recognizing that ecclesial discernment, care for decision-making processes and the commitment to be responsible for one's own actions and to evaluate the outcome of our own decisions are practices

with which we respond to the Word, that shows us the ways of mission" (cf. n. 79).

Agreement will become simpler only when we put into practice the fourth and final criterion of *Veritatis Gaudium*, which "concerns the urgent need for 'networking' between those institutions worldwide that cultivate and promote ecclesiastical studies, in order to set up suitable channels of cooperation also with academic institutions in different countries and with those inspired by different cultural and religious traditions" (4d).

This must be thought of and implemented—as illustrated in *Evangelii Gaudium*—according to the model of the "polyhedron, which reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness," (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 236; *VG* 4d) also taking responsibility for historical conflicts in the commitment to an effective, and not simply compromising "resolution [of them] which takes place on a higher plane and preserves what is valid and useful on both sides" (4d).

The *amazement*, however, should be the force that inspires dialogue and the seal that confirms what has been agreed. Dialogue, serenity, and joy are clear signs of communion between the parties. Synodality has a dimension that reveals something of the nature of the Church and, at the same time, is constitutive of its unity in the multiplicity of its expressions. This is the convergence of the notion of the Church as *koinonia*, which is realized in each local Church and her relationship with other Churches, through specific structures and synodal processes.[5]

In this regard, "theology has a particular competence and responsibility. Through constant dialogue with the social,

5. Cf. Commissione Teologica Internazionale, *La sinodalità nella vita e missione della Chiesa,* n. 116.

religious, and cultural currents of the time, and with openness towards other sciences which, using their own methods, study these developments, theology can help the faithful and the Magisterium to see the importance of the movements, events, and trends in human history, and to discern and interpret the ways in which the Spirit may be speaking to the Church and the world."[6]

Synodality is built through dialogue, with the understanding that acceptance will not always follow. The proclamation of the Gospel inevitably coexists with rejection by some. We must respect those who are *ad intra* of the church who, while sharing the same faith, hold differing views on non-essential matters. Likewise, we must show respect toward those who are *ad extra*—who do not share our faith in Christ in order to allow their voice to be heard and reflected on as well.

Thank you.

6. Cf. Commissione Teologica Internazionale, *La sinodalita nella vita e missione della Chiesa*, n. 53.

A CRITICAL RE-EXAMINATION OF KARL RAHNER'S *GRUNDAXIOM*: THE AXIOMATIC UNITY OF THE "ECONOMIC" AND "IMMANENT" TRINITY

Salvador G. Agualada, Jr., C.M.F.

Introduction

Among Catholic theologians, Karl Rahner is regarded as a preeminent figure in the revitalization of Trinitarian theology, whose work profoundly shaped the way other theologians think about the Trinity and its relevance for Christian life and mission. In *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, Catherine Mowry LaCugna commends Rahner for having done so much "to reawaken interest in trinitarian theology... [which] is a profound meditation on the essential unity of 'theology' and economy."[1] Certainly, LaCugna is just one among many "ecumenical" theologians who ascribe to Rahner—especially to the milestone publication of his book, *The Trinity*—the profound and lively contemporary understanding and appreciation of the theology and place of the Trinity in our Christian life. In her "Introduction" to Rahner's *The Trinity*, she underscores the seminal importance of Rahner's landmark opus for Catholic dogmatic theology when she writes: "Rahner's book launched one of the most significant theological developments of the last few decades: the restoration of the doctrine of the Trinity

1. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1973), 222.

to its rightful place at the center of the Christian faith."[2] For Neil Ormerod, this was the aim of Rahner's work: "to bring Trinitarian doctrine and theology back into the centre of Christian theology, in particular bringing it into direct contact with Christology and the theology of grace."[3]

Rahner himself commented in his "Remarks on the Dogmatic Treatise '*De Trinitate*'" and in his *The Trinity* that despite the deep and genuine mysticisms of the Trinity in the lives of such great saints as Bonaventure, Ignatius of Loyola, John of the Cross, and Blessed Elisabeth of the Holy Trinity—to cite a few of those he mentioned—"Christians, for all their orthodox profession of faith in the Trinity, are almost just 'monotheists' in their actual religious experience,"[4] that "should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged."[5] Rahner took offense at neo-scholasticism for constructing a doctrine of the Trinity that is allegedly fundamentally disconnected from the revelation and experience of God in salvation history and that has nothing to do with the goals and ends of Christian life, which is salvation in God.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a critical re-examination of Rahner's *grundaxiom* on the identity of the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity by presenting arguments that support the first part of Rahner's Rule (as some people call it) while challenging the second part. Consequently, we will

2. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, "Introduction," in Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1967), xxi.

3. Neil Ormerod, "Wrestling with Rahner on the Trinity," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 68 (2003): 213.

4. Karl Rahner, "Remarks on the Dogmatic Treatise 'De Trinitate'" in *Theological Investigations*, IV (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), 79. Cf. Rahner, *The Trinity*, 10.

5. Rahner, *The Trinity*, 10-11. Cf. Rahner, "Remarks on the Dogmatic Treatise '*De Trinitate*,'" 79.

draw on the work of other theologians to provide an in-depth analysis and nuanced evaluation of Rahner's *grundaxiom*.

Overview of Karl Rahner's *Grundaxiom* in *The Trinity*

Rahner's trinitarian theology, developed systematically in his book, *The Trinity*,[6] and partly in his article, "Remarks on the Dogmatic Treatise 'De Trinitate,'" is encapsulated in his famous but controversial axiom, *"[t]he 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity is the 'economic' Trinity"* (22; emphasis in the original), or "the Trinity of the economy of salvation is the immanent Trinity and vice versa."[7] This identification between the "economic" and "immanent" Trinity is, for Rahner, "axiomatic," his basic axiom (*grundaxiom*). First, let us define the key terms in Rahner's axiom. For Rahner, the "economic" Trinity refers to God's activity and presence in the world, manifested in the joint mission of the Son and Spirit in the works of redemption and sanctification in salvation history, and is thus the historical manifestation of the eternal self-communication of God within the spheres of time and history. The "Immanent" Trinity, on the other hand, refers to the divine persons of Father, Son, and Spirit in reciprocal relationships to one another "within" the Godhead.[8]

In *The Trinity*, Rahner presents his three chief Christological and Trinitarian convictions:

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6. Cf. Since this section primarily tackles Rahner's *The Trinity*, I will merely mention the book's page number(s), whenever I quote it or refer to it, to conserve space. I will also only discuss a few of the book's most pertinent arguments in support of his axiomatic unity between the "economic" Trinity and the "immanent" Trinity, and not all of the Trinitarian arguments of the entire book.

7. Rahner, "Remarks on the Dogmatic Treatise 'De Trinitate,'" 87.

8. Cf. LaCugna, "Introduction," xiii-xiv; LaCugna, *God for Us*, 211-212.

[1] that *only* the Logos, the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, could have been incarnated (11, 120); "[t]he second divine person, God's Logos, is man, and only he is man" (23);

[2] "that the incarnation of precisely this person can tell us... about the peculiar features of *this* person within the divinity" (11); and

[3] that God's self-communication to human beings, which is precisely what we mean by uncreated grace, is God's communication of his very *self* to humans and not merely of some "created" effects of grace (22).

Rahner argues that we can have knowledge of the immanent Trinity by considering the economic Trinity, that "the doctrine of the 'missions' is from its very nature the starting point for the doctrine of the Trinity" (48), that "the experience of faith which assures us that the incomprehensible God is really, as he is in himself, [is] given to us in the... twofold reality of Christ and his Spirit" (55). To prove this claim, Rahner tries to demonstrate that the "missions" of the Son and the Spirit *ad extra* are not mere "appropriations" but are revelatory of the inner life of the immanent Trinity. For him, the Incarnation "belongs to the Logos alone" (23), and is not just appropriated to him, even if it is "casually effected by the whole Trinity" (23). Likewise, grace should not be understood solely as "created" effects in us caused by God in an *efficient* way, or that it is merely "appropriated" to the third person of the Trinity (the Holy Spirit), even if it is the work of the entire Trinity; rather, it is to be considered as God's self-communication (22-23).

For Rahner, the Incarnation, which is the "mission" of the Logos alone (24-25), is "a dogmatically certain 'instance'" of proper roles in the economy (27). The proposition that any of the three divine persons could have been incarnated is, for Rahner, not supported and "demonstrated" by the Scriptures

and the Church Fathers, and hence "false," so that it cannot be argued "that 'hypostasis' is in God a univocal concept with respect to the three divine persons" (29). Also, according to Rahner, such a proposition "would create havoc with theology" as "[t]here would no longer be any connection between 'mission' and the intra-trinitarian life" (30). If this happens, the redemptive mission of the Logos would tell us nothing about his eternally-begotten relationship with the Father. Hence, "we cling to the truth that the Logos is really as he appears in revelation, that he is *the one* who reveals to us... the triune God, on account of the personal being which belongs exclusively to him, the Father's Logos" (30). Since, the human nature of Jesus "is the constitutive, real symbol of the Logos himself... the Logos with God and the Logos for us, the immanent and the economic Logos, are strictly the same" (33).

Likewise, Rahner asserts that the Trinity revealed in salvation history is the same Trinity that exists eternally, and this unity is grounded in the experience of God's grace (34-38). For him, if God's communication is a *self*-communication, which is what uncreated grace is, then it is the entire Trinity that is communicated, whereby "each one of the three divine persons communicates himself to man in gratuitous grace in his own personal peculiarity and diversity" (34-35), and where "these three self-communications are the self-communication of the one God in the three relative ways in which God subsists" (35). God indeed "relates to us in a threefold manner, and this threefold, free, and gratuitous relation to us *is* not merely a copy or an analogy of the inner Trinity, but this Trinity itself, albeit as freely and gratuitously communicated" (35).

Furthermore, for Rahner, this self-bestowal of God to human beings happens not out of a mere *efficient* causality, which is a result of created grace, but rather by virtue of a *quasi-formal*

causality, which means none other than the indwelling of the Trinity in the human, God's very offer of himself to man, something that, for Rahner, is intrinsic to human nature (35-37). "God's self-communication is truly a *self*-communication. He does not merely indirectly give his creature some share of himself *by* creating and giving us created and finite realities through his omnipotent *efficient* causality. In a *quasi-formal* causality he really, and in the strictest sense of the word, bestows himself" (36).

Let me delve deeper into two key insights from the preceding paragraph. Rahner's expression—"quasi-formal causality"—is an important expression for him in trying to explain how God can become and remain an intrinsic, constitutive principle of the human person without ceasing to be divine, and without the human ceasing to be a creature. To understand how this is possible, we must distinguish between two kinds of causality or causes: efficient and formal. Whereas in efficient causality, God effects something different from himself, such as in the act of creation, in formal causality, God exerts a different kind of causality, which Rahner calls "quasi-formal causality." In his self-bestowal to a spiritual subject, God does not create an effect different from himself, but rather communicates himself, a self-communication in which God becomes the intrinsic co-constitutive element of the human subject on account of the divine self-communication to this creature. Thus, God becomes the formal cause of the spiritual subject's supernatural acts, without ceasing to be God and without the human ceasing to be human. Rahner appends the prefix "quasi" to ensure that despite God becoming and acting as the formal cause of our graced acts, he remains the wholly infinite, transcendent, and sovereign God; that God does not lose himself in his divine self-communication to the human but rather preserves absolutely intact his divine essence and his

radical freedom.[9] An essential insight that follows consequently from this idea or is fundamentally rooted in it is Rahner's *The Trinity*'s third Christological and Trinitarian conviction previously mentioned (22): that, in God's self-communication in grace to the human, God is not communicating something *about* himself but *his* very self, which is the primary meaning of grace. In *Foundations of Christian Faith*, Rahner contends that, in the divine self-communication to the human, "God in his own most proper reality makes himself the innermost constitutive element of man," that "what is communicated is really God in his own being," that what God offers is "himself in his own reality," that "God... does not give some numinous, mysterious gift which is different from himself, but... gives himself."[10]

In closing, let me reiterate that for Rahner, there are "two distinct yet related ways... of the free gratuitous self-communication of God... in Jesus Christ and in the 'Spirit'" (83), two distinct yet interrelated and mutually conditioning modes of free, gratuitous self-communication of God. The mysteries of the Incarnation and grace are two manifestations of the one-self-communication of the one God, and the distinctions among Father, Son, and Spirit that are experienced in the history of salvation "must belong to God 'in himself', or otherwise this difference, which undoubtedly exists, would do away with God's self-communication" (100).

Critique of Karl Rahner's Basic Axiom (*Grundaxiom*)

In spite of the robust, almost universal attraction of Rahner's *grundaxiom*, many theologians have found themselves

9. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith. An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1978), 120-122; Karl Rahner, "Some Implications of the Scholastic Concept of Uncreated Grace," in *Theological Investigations*, I (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd., 1974), 330-331.

10. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 116, 117, 119, 125.

only willing to accept the first part of the axiom and could not bring themselves to embrace the second part.

The "Economic" Trinity Is The "Immanent" Trinity: Agreement

The statement that the "economic" Trinity *is* the "immanent" Trinity does not seem to pose any problem for most theologians. In fact, for Walter Kasper, it can be argued that "what Karl Rahner sets down as a basic principle, reflects a broad consensus among the theologians of the various churches."[11] As initially examined, the identity of the "economic" and "immanent" Trinity means that God absolutely and entirely gives Godself to the human without remainder, and that, therefore, what is communicated, revealed, and given in the economy of salvation is God as he is in himself.[12] Reiterating Rahner's basic idea, John J. O'Donnell, in his book, *The Mystery of the Triune God*, says: "God does not want to offer something other than himself but himself. The Giver and the Gift are identical in the act of revelation."[13] For Rahner, the historical dimension of God's self-communication establishes the order of theological knowledge, as we always theologize on something revealed—revealed in salvation history. The divine economy of salvation, manifested in the missions of Christ and the Spirit in the world and history, is the starting point for knowledge of the eternal mystery of God, the only legitimate starting point for a theology of God.

Even the International Theological Commission, in its 1981 document entitled "Theology, Christology, Anthropology,"

11. Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1984), 274.

12. Cf. LaCugna, "Introduction," xvi.

13. John J. O'Donnell, *The Mystery of the Triune God* (London: Sheed & Ward Ltd., 1988, 29.

has given its *imprimatur* to this expression. Following Rahner and others who agree with him in the first part of the axiom, the Commission affirms that the Trinity revealed in salvation history is the same Trinity that exists eternally, and that it is this immanent Trinity that is communicated freely and gratuitously in the economy of salvation. Indeed, the economic Trinity is "for us the only definitive source of all knowledge of the mystery of the Trinity;" thus, "[t]he elaboration of the doctrine of the Trinity had its beginnings in the economy of salvation."[14] Similarly, Luis Ladaria observes that "[i]n the life of Jesus, in the revelation of the 'economic Trinity,' we see opening before us the mystery of the immanent Trinity."[15]

Rahner's trinitarian theology is premised on the belief that God is by nature self-communicating: the Father communicates the divine essence by "uttering" the Son in the Incarnation and bestowing the Spirit who makes possible our human response in grace. If God is by nature self-communicating, then God, who necessarily what God is, must communicate Godself, otherwise—and at the risk of being tautologous—he would cease being self-communicating. From this perspective, if the Triune God revealed by Jesus in the economy of salvation is not who God is *in se*, then God has not really communicated himself at all. For Rahner, God's self-communication as grace must—if it is a real self-communication—reflect the divine nature and thus the Trinity, for the gift that God truly offers to the human is nothing but God's own self, his very self. "[T]he God who is

14. International Theological Commission, "Theology, Christology, Anthropology," *International Theological Commission Texts and Documents 1969-1985* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 215.

15. Luis Ladaria, *The Living and True God* (Miami: Convivium Press, 2010), 42.

revealed to us appears before us just as he is. Otherwise, there would not be a true revelation."[16]

For if it true that God really has communicated himself in our salvation history, i.e., if the one Holy Mystery has offered himself (and not something other than himself) in the incarnation and grace, then it follows, as Rahner argues, that God in his own life must also exist in these three modes of being. If God has held nothing back in his revelation, then God in his own life is as he is in his revelation. If God in his revelation is three-fold, then God in his infinite Being is trinitarian Mystery.[17]

God's self-communication in the world through Christ and the Spirit must take place in accord with the immanent self-expression of God the Father to the Son in the Spirit. Indeed, what we see God doing in the world and history mirrors the relationships of the Father, Son, and Spirit in eternity.

Indeed, the divine economy of salvation through Christ and the Spirit fully expresses what God is in himself; hence, no matter how mysterious God is and remains, this God will not turn out to be different from the God revealed in salvation history. The identity of the economic and immanent Trinity means that what God has revealed and communicated in Christ and the Spirit is the reality of God as God is eternally, immanently, for what is given in grace "is not merely a copy or an analogy of the inner Trinity, but this Trinity itself, albeit as freely and gratuitously communicated," since "[t]hat which is communicated is precisely the triune personal God" (35-36). Echoing Rahner's thought, Walter Kasper, in his book, *The God of*

16. Ladaria, *The Living and True God*, 50. Ladaria also writes: "If he did not give himself to us as he is, he would not be giving himself. If he did not manifest himself as he is, he would not be revealing himself to us" (Ibid., 56).

17. J. O'Donnell, *The Mystery of the Triune God*, 35.

Jesus Christ, explains: "[This] self-communication in the history of salvation would not truly be God's self-communication unless it also belonged to God in himself, unless the economic Trinity were also the immanent Trinity."[18] For Kasper,

> God's action through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit is therefore truly God's saving action only if we are dealing with God himself and if God himself is there for us as he is in himself. The economic Trinity would thus be deprived of all meaning if it were not at the same time the immanent Trinity.[19]

Moreover, from the soteriological point of view, the "economic" Trinity must be the "immanent" Trinity; otherwise, salvation would not be possible because only God saves. "This salvation would be undermined if we did not really have to do with God himself."[20] Luis Ladaria, in his book, *The Living and True God*, sums it up: "There is thus a correspondence between the economic and the immanent Trinity, they are the same, they are not distinguished adequately. In this respect, there is no doubt that the postulate set forth by Rahner, at least in its first part, is both legitimate and necessary."[21] Kasper concludes that the economic Trinity "has meaning and significance only if God is present in the history of salvation as the one who is from eternity; more accurately, if God does not simply show himself to us as Father, Son and Spirit in the history of salvation, but is in fact Father, Son and Spirit from all eternity."[22] John Galvin recapitulates the argument in this section in these words:

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18. Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, 301.

19. Ibid., 274.

20. O'Donnell, *The Mystery of the Triune God*, 3

21. Ladaria, *The Living and True God*, 56.

22. Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, 276.

> The basic principle is that the way God reveals himself corresponds to the way he is in reality. In more technical theological vocabulary, the "economic Trinity" (God as he reveals himself in the history, or economy, of salvation) is the same as the "immanent Trinity" (God as he is eternally in himself). Were this not so, God's self-communication would not be genuine self-gift and self-revelation. Thus our threefold experience of God, the holy mystery — as incomprehensible ground of his own self-gift, as present for us in our concrete history in Jesus Christ, and as transforming us in the innermost core of our existence—rightly leads us to speak of Father, Son, and Spirit, not only in our experience of God, but in the one God himself.[23]

The "Immanent" Trinity *Is* the "Economic" Trinity: Disagreement

The problem[24] lies in the second part of the axiom, of whether the "immanent" Trinity can really be strictly identical with the "economic" Trinity. In two separate places, LaCugna poses the questions in their simplest expressions: "Is God with us exactly identical to God as such?"[25] "Must there not be a

23. John P. Galvin, "The Invitation of Grace" in Leo J. O'Donovan (ed.)*: An Introduction to the Themes and Foundations of Karl Rahner's Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 68.

24. Kasper seems to admit only that "the identification of the immanent and economic Trinities as established in... [Rahner's] axiom is, susceptible of several meanings and open to various interpretations," and enumerated some of the possible misinterpretations (Cf. Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, 275-276). Instead of readily saying that the "vice versa" principle is wrong, Ladaria, in his interpretation of Rahner's dictum, also contents himself rather with determining "what this axiom does not mean" (Cf. Ladaria, *The Living and True God*, 57).

25. LaCugna, *God For Us*, 216.

certain asymmetry between God '*in se*' and God '*pro nobis*'?"[26] It is easy to understand where this question is coming from. One who holds the strict identity of the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity will find it extremely difficult to avoid the almost foregone conclusion that the world and history are the stage on which God determines himself as God and, therefore, God necessarily depends on creation to be God, and that creation exists by necessity.[27] The first part of the statement robs God of his absolute freedom, sovereignty, and transcendence; the second part strips creation of its gratuity. Indeed, "even though it is quite clear that the revelation of the Trinity in the saving economy is founded on the immanent Trinity, the latter might exist without its economic manifestation."[28] Rahner's "vice versa" principle fails to provide any clue on how to maintain the freedom and gratuitousness of God's self-communication in the world and history.

In this side of the equation, we truly find a risk of conceiving an un-Christian image of God, for God will be viewed as a God who has to create the world and be incarnated in history in order to realize his own trinitarian being. If we maintain, thus, that there is no "gap" between the immanent and the economic Trinity, then it both implies a necessity on God's part to create the world for God's self-communicating *ad intra* would require a self-bestowal *ad extra*, and follows that the divine economy of salvation reveals all and contains all that is in the

26. LaCugna, "Introduction," xiv. Rahner (in the words of LaCugna) believes that "[there] is only one trinitarian self-communication, which has both eternal and temporal aspects. Rahner does not mean... that eternal and temporal realms are strictly identical, only that no gap may be inserted... between 'God' and 'God for us.'" LaCugna, *God for Us*, 216.

27. For O'Donnell, "[t]his would be the doctrine that God can only be God, can only realize himself as divine by involving himself in history" (O'Donnell, *The Mystery of the Triune God*, 38).

28. Ladaria, *The Living and True God*, 57.

immanent Trinity. Yet, God's nature as God, absolutely free and sovereign and transcendent, dictates that we singularly affirm that "God may be self-communicating *ad intra*, but God need not bestow Godself *ad extra* (creation being one moment of God's self-communication)."[29] Indeed, the immanent Trinity reveals and communicates Godself in the economy of salvation freely and gratuitously, in the freedom of love. For Ladaria, "the identity does not mean that the immanent Trinity only exists in the economic Trinity, that God becomes triune insofar as he communicates himself to humanity, or that the Trinity of persons is the result of his free decision for the purpose of this *self-communication*."[30] The immanent Trinity manifests freely and gratuitously in salvation history. Creation and Incarnation are gratuitous acts of God, a God who is not perfected with creation or with the economy of salvation, a God who has no need for humanity or for the world to be God. Ladaria believes that it is only when the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity are differentiated that divine freedom can be maintained.[31] "The immanent Trinity is not fulfilled or dissolved in the economy. It has fullness in itself, regardless of the creation and the saving work."[32] At the end of his brilliant article devoted to comparing "Augustine and Karl Rahner on the Relationship between the Immanent Trinity and the Economic Trinity" (the title itself), an article that is very sympathetic to Augustine and extremely critical of Rahner, Drayton Benner concludes:

> Rahner's basic axiom leads him into numerous theological difficulties which he could have avoided had he accepted Augustine's relationship between the economic and immanent Trinities, namely that *the two are closely related*

29. LaCugna, "Introduction," xv.

30. Ladaria, *The Living and True God*, 58.

31. Ladaria, *The LIving and True God*, 58.

32. Ladaria, *The LIving and True God*, 58.

> *but not identical*, with the economic Trinity revealing the immanent Trinity. There may indeed be some ways in which Augustine's trinitarian theology could be improved, but Rahner's proposal that the economic and immanent Trinities are identical does not provide fertile ground for any such improvements.[33]

Reflecting on the insight of Yves Congar who asks whether God exhausts and reveals all his mystery in His self-communication in the economy of salvation, Ladaria argues that we cannot infiltrate all the mysteries of the triune God, the intra-divine life, the unity and distinction of the divine persons, the generation of the Word and the procession of the Spirit, and affirms that only in the eschatological consummation can we, humans, hope to know God fully in his self-bestowal. The immanent Trinity's self-communication in salvation history, therefore, calls for an acceptance of an element of *kenosis* and the cross that compels us to presuppose a distinction between who God is in himself and who God is for us.[34]

The International Theological Commission, in its critique of the second part of the axiom or the "vice versa," is very clear on this matter. Unequivocally, it asserts:

> The Trinity was not simply brought about in the history of salvation by means of the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, as though a historical process were necessary for God to emerge as Trinitarian. Therefore, the distinction must be maintained between the immanent Trinity, where liberty and necessity are the same thing in the eternal essence of God, and the Trinity of the economy

33. Drayton C. Benner, "Augustine and Karl Rahner on the Relationship between the Immanent Trinity and the Economic Trinity," in *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9/1 (2007), 38; emphasis mine.

34. Cf. Benner, "Augustine and Karl Rahner," 61-62.

> of salvation, where God exercises his liberty absolutely, with no suggestion of his being forced to it.[35]

For Ladaria, the identification between the economic and immanent Trinity must then be understood in two related senses:

> on the one hand God gives and reveals himself to us just as he is in himself, but that he does it freely, that is, his being is not realized or perfected in this self-communication; and that on the other hand, in this revelation God maintains his mystery, his greater nearness denotes the most direct manifestation of his greater magnificence.[36]

For the International Theological Commission, there is always "more" in the immanent Trinity that has been revealed to us and which we have known in God's economy of salvation. Additionally, the Commission affirms not only that in the mystery of Jesus Christ, the Father is revealed and communicated to us freely and gratuitously, but also that the divine persons in the Trinity lead a triune life in a most profound and almost new manner because of the economy of salvation.[37] God's saving economy has not brought perfection and growth in God, but it has "touched" the very being of God. The humanity of the Incarnate Son has entered into the life of the Trinity. The eternal relationships of the divine persons now include the humanity of the Incarnate Logos. Ladaria admits

35. International Theological Commission, "Theology, Christology, Anthropology," 216.

36. Ladaria, *The Living and True God*, 62. For Kasper, "if, then, the axiom which states the identity of the immanent and economic Trinities is not to lead to the dissolution of the immanent Trinity instead of to its substantiation, this identity must not be understood along the lines of the tautological formula A = A. The 'is' in this axiom must be understood as meaning not an identification but rather a non-deducible, free, gracious, historical presence of the immanent Trinity in the economic Trinity" (Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, 276).

37. International Theological Commission, "Theology, Christology, Anthropology," 216.

that this, in his opinion, is one of the most valuable aspects of the Commission's document, the idea that the kenotic event of the incarnation and death is assumed by the eternal Son in his life. Insofar as the Son assumes in his life these events, they affect... the very being of God the Father, who cannot live as his own, with the same Son and the Holy Spirit, the events of the temporal life of the incarnated Son. This means that the life of the Trinity, which is not constituted by virtue of these events, is lived from them in a way "almost new." In other words, even though, in relation to the saving economy, the category of necessity has no place, the former, once it has been freely decided by God, "affects" the divine life of the immanent Trinity. God has not wanted to be without us. This does not mean that the Trinity is perfected by the economy or that the economy gives the Trinity something that the Trinity had been lacking. The newness lies in the fact that the Son has entered as man into the relationships that make up the Trinity.[38]

Conclusion

We have explored the various theological challenges to Rahner's *grundaxiom*, particularly its assertion of the identity between the immanent and economic Trinity. Despite the theological "weakness" of his "vice versa" principle, it was Rahner, especially within the Catholic circle, who revived the

38. Ladaria, *The Living and True God*, 64. According to Rahner, "God's communication consists precisely in the fact that God really arrives at man, really enters into man's situation, assumes it himself, and *thus* is what [God] is" (Rahner, *The Trinity*, 89). For LaCugna, "[t]hough it is impossible to specify from God's side what is new, God is God 'in a new way' because of the world... God's self-expression in the economy of salvation thereby becomes an essential dimension of God's being as God" (LaCugna, *God For Us*, 220). Indeed, "one must acknowledge that something new happens to God in the incarnation. By virtue of his becoming flesh, God has a new mode of being in the world. We witness this in the classical thesis that God became man. As Rahner insists, we cannot so water down that nothing happens to God. Despite the classical axiom of God's immutability, the incarnation implies that God really does 'become'. As Rahner puts it, even if God is unchangeable in himself, he does become in the other, i.e. in his humanity" (O'Donnell, *The Mystery of the Triune God*, 37).

appreciation of the Trinity as the primordial mystery of our Christian life after the doctrine's isolation from the rest of the dogmatic system for more than a century. It was this great German theologian who made a strong appeal to all Christians to consider the doctrine of the Trinity seriously, not just as a doctrine about God but as the central and fundamental truth in the whole Christian theology and praxis, the doctrinal truth around which all other derived truths concerning our salvation must revolve. "The Trinity is a mystery of *salvation*, otherwise it would never have been revealed."[39] Rahner's theology of the Trinity summoned the Church back to a doctrine of God in which the story of the one God in Jesus Christ reveals the truth of the immanent Triune God who exists eternally as such, as Trinity, from all eternity. Indeed, because of, and thanks to, Rahner, it is no longer true, as he once feared, that "should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged."[40]

39. Rahner, *The Trinity*, 21; emphasis in the original.

40. Rahner, *The Trinity*, 10-11.

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

Rheadh R. Dela Torre

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.

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).

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.

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.

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/.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

> 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.

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.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE STATE OF VIETNAM: A JOURNEY TOWARDS JUSTICE, CHARITY, AND FAITH

Dao Duc Minh, O.M.I.

Introduction

Main Concern

The Vietnamese government has recently made a momentous decision by granting permission for the resident representative of Pope Francis to operate in Vietnam. This move signifies a significant development in the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Vietnamese government. In addition, the President of Vietnam has formally invited Pope Francis to visit the country, underscoring the growing rapport between the two entities. This gesture holds promise for fostering greater understanding and collaboration between the Catholic Church and the Vietnamese government.

The relationship between the Catholic Church and the government in Vietnam has been complex and, at times, contentious. The government has, at times, restricted the activities of the Church, leading to tensions and disagreements. However, in recent years, there have been efforts to improve relations, with the government showing greater tolerance towards the Catholic Church and allowing for more religious freedom.

This paper aims to thoroughly investigate the evolving relationship between the Church and the Vietnamese government,

focusing on understanding the factors contributing to its improvement. Additionally, it will analyze the potential implications of this evolving relationship for the future of both entities. Accordingly, the Vietnamese Church has embodied the principles of Justice, Charity, and Faith to promote the spirit of harmony and love in Vietnam.

Method: See-Judge-Act Pastoral Framework

See:

- The development of the intricate dynamics between the State and the Church in Vietnam will be carefully examined in this paper. Furthermore, an analysis will be conducted on the relationship between the State of Vietnam and the Vatican, delving into the complexities and nuances that have shaped their interactions over time.
- The paper also evaluates the contribution of the Catholic Church to social life in Vietnam, especially amidst the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Over the years, the Vietnamese state has undergone a significant transformation in its approach toward Vietnamese Catholics, with a noticeable increase in trust in the Catholic Church. This paper is to discuss this shift in policy, reflecting a growing recognition of the positive contributions that the Catholic community makes to society.

Judge:

- The paper will assess the reasons for mutual suspicion between the state and the Church of Vietnam.
- It will also consider the efforts of the Vietnamese Church to live the value of Justice, Charity, and Faith,

about the Vietnamese state, both without creating further misunderstandings and not to be controlled by the state.

Act:

- Learning from the realities of its relationship with the State of Vietnam, the Church can continue to preach the Gospel in harmony both with the State and with other sectors of Vietnamese society.
- We can learn from the spirit of Synodality to create a fruitful atmosphere of harmony and collaboration in both the Church and the society of Vietnam.

The Developments in the Church-State Relations in Vietnam

Stages of Development in the Relationship between the Catholic Church and the State of Vietnam since 1975

In 1975, Vietnam experienced a significant milestone as it unified into one country with the title "The Socialist Republic of Vietnam."[1] This event had a profound impact on the Catholic Church in Vietnam, leading to substantial changes within the religious community.

Stage 1 Repression and Resistance (1975-1986): After the reunification of Vietnam, the Catholic Church faced severe restrictions and persecution. Many church properties were confiscated, foreign missionaries were expelled, and local clergy and laity were arrested even without a sentence. The Church resisted the government's interference and maintained its loyalty to the Pope and the universal Church. Many Catholics fled the country as refugees.

1. The National Assembly Of Vietnam, *The Constitution Of The Socialist Republic Of Vietnam* (Hanoi, 2013), no. 1.

Stage 2 Reform, Dialogue, and Reconciliation (1986-2016): With the introduction of the Doi Moi (Renovation) policy in 1986, the government adopted a more pragmatic and tolerant approach to religion, allowing for some degree of religious freedom and social service activities by the Church. The Church also initiated a dialogue with the government, seeking to improve the situation of the Catholics and to normalize the relations between the state and the Holy See. Some positive signs of progress were the release of some imprisoned priests, and the reopening of some seminaries and churches. The visit of President Nguyen Minh Triet on 11 December 2009 resulted in the establishment of a Viet Nam-Holy See Joint Working Group.[2]

The new millennium witnessed a further improvement in the relationship between the Church and the state, marked by mutual respect and collaboration. The government recognized the Church's contribution to the development and stability of the country and granted more permissions for pastoral activities, religious education, and charitable works. The Church supported the government's efforts to combat poverty, corruption, and social evils. The most significant achievement of this stage was the restoration of diplomatic relations between the Holy See and Vietnam in 2011, after decades of estrangement.

Stage 3 Existing Challenges and Opportunities (2017-present):

The Church has taken numerous new initiatives in its relationship with the Vietnamese government. The Church may set up additional parishes and dioceses. The Church can organize priestly ordinations, just by informing the Vietnamese state,

2. Lisa Zengarini, "Vietnam's President Meets with Catholic Bishops in Ho Chi Minh City," *Vatican News*, August 8, 2023, https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2023-08/the-vietnamese-president-meets-bishops.html.

rather than seeking approval as previously required.[3] The State recognized the favorable impacts of the Church on Vietnam in both domestic and international matters. There are still some challenges, nevertheless, the circumstances have improved significantly compared to the past.

Misunderstanding between Catholic Church and the State of Vietnam

After the unification of Vietnam in 1975, there was a significant misunderstanding between the Catholic Church and the government of Vietnam. This resulted from various factors, including historical tensions, political ideologies, and conflicting interests.

The Vietnamese State perceived Catholicism as a threat to their authority and mistakenly associated it with the Western world and anti-Communist forces. "Vietnam's rulers are acutely aware that Catholics were among the most committed anti-Communist Vietnamese during the Vietnam War."[4] They believed that all Catholics, especially the clergy, were opposed to Communism, leading them to view Catholicism as a challenge to their power. This misunderstanding led to strained relations, with the government imposing restrictions on the Catholic Church and its activities. The Church, in turn, resisted these limitations, leading to a prolonged period of conflict and mistrust.

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3. TCTCNN, "Quyền Tự Do Tôn Giáo Tại Việt Nam [Freedom of Religion in Vietnam]," *National Organization Magazine*, September 3, 2023, https://tcnn.vn/news/detail/61016/Quyen-tu-do-ton-giao-tai-Viet-Nam.html.

4. Samuel Gregg, "Corruption, Communism, and Catholicism in Vietnam," *Acton Institute*, August 12, 2009, https://www.acton.org/pub/commentary/2009/08/12/corruption-communism-and-catholicism-vietnam.

The misunderstanding mentioned marked the start of a journey aimed at fostering reconciliation and mutual understanding between the Church and the government of Vietnam.

The Vietnamese Church Goes Through Hardships with Faith and Perseverance

We are going to examine the immense difficulties that the Vietnamese Church had to endure following the year 1975, specifically by illustrating the challenges through the use of concrete and specific instances.

A Cardinal is Arrested after the Event of 1975

The arrest of Cardinal Van Thuan demonstrates his unwavering resolve during difficult times. It represented the challenges that the Vietnamese clergy had to face. The government's arrest of Cardinal Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan in 1975 was not merely a single occurrence; it served as a powerful representation of the significant obstacles that the Catholic Church encountered in Vietnam. His situation embodies the intricate and intense misunderstanding that has characterized the connection between religious beliefs and political authority in the nation.

Cardinal Francis Xavier's detention, occurring only days before the collapse of Saigon, had a profound impact due to its timing and the specific individual targeted. He was not just an ordinary clergyman, but rather a prominent figure within the Church, representing its ethical influence and unwavering strength. His imprisonment during the unstable period of governmental transition conveyed a chilling warning to the broader Catholic community.[5]

5. Xuân Lộc Đoàn, "Về Đức Hồng y Nguyễn Văn Thuận [About Cardinal Nguyen Van Thuan]," *Vietnamese BBC News*, October 22, 2010, https://www.bbc.com/vietnamese/world/2010/10/101022_cardinal_thuan_news.

"He spent 13 years in prison and under house arrest in his homeland after the State came to power in 1975, after the Vietnam War, and began repressing the Roman Catholic Church."[6] His experiences mirrored the persecution faced by countless clergy and faithful: land confiscations, restrictions on worship, and societal pressure. However, his unwavering faith and ability to forgive even his captors offered a beacon of hope and resistance.

While persecution was a brutal reality, the Church faced another challenge: navigating a new political landscape. Van Thuan's imprisonment highlighted the complex question of how to engage with the government of Vietnam. Should the Church confront the regime openly or seek dialogue and compromise? This dilemma continues to shape the Church's actions today.

The difficulties experienced by Van Thuan and the Church still have an impact in the present time. The issue of religious freedom remains a worry in Vietnam, and the connection between the Church and the government is still changing. His narrative serves as a reminder of the lasting power of faith in the presence of political suppression, providing important teachings for communities dealing with comparable challenges worldwide.

Confiscation policy of the State after 1975-event

Just after 1975, "Many of the Church's activities — from faith and pure worship to educational, medical, charitable activities — are restricted and prohibited. Many Church facilities — such

6. Reuters, "Cardinal Nguyen Van Thuan, 74; Was Held Prisoner in Vietnam," *The New York Times*, September 21, 2002, https://www.nytimes.com/2002/09/21/world/cardinal-nguyen-van-thuan-74-was-held-prisoner-in-vietnam.html.

as schools, hospitals, charity centers — were confiscated."[7] Its action came from the idea "based on the goal of eliminating socioeconomic class struggles by creating a classless society in which everyone shares the benefits of labor and the state controls all property and wealth."[8] The State wanted to use the confiscated property for its purposes, such as building public facilities, housing, or offices. It also wanted to deprive the Church of its economic and social resources and influence. Consequently, many of the Church's activities, including those related to faith, worship, education, healthcare, and charity, were restricted or prohibited. This significantly hindered the ability of the Church to carry out its mission and serve the community. The government took control of confiscated Church facilities, including schools, hospitals, and charity centers. This limited the access for both Catholics and non-Catholics in Vietnam to essential services that had previously been offered by the Church.

Furthermore, the government's actions were aimed at undermining the economic and social resources of the Church. By confiscating its properties, the government sought to weaken the Church's influence and control over the community. There was a misconception that the Catholic Church posed a threat to the Vietnamese government, which led authorities to be concerned about its influence within Vietnam. This had a profound effect on the ability of the Church to support its members.

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7. Xuân Lộc Đoàn, "Giáo Hội Công Giáo VN Sau Biến Cố 30/4 [Vietnamese Catholic Church after the April 30 Incident]," *Vietnamese BBC News*, April 19, 2015, https://www.bbc.com/vietnamese/forum/2015/04/150419_30april_doanxuanloc.

8. National Geographic Society, "Communism," *National Geographic Education*, accessed May 10, 2024, https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/communism/.

Overall, the confiscation of the Catholic church's properties by the Vietnamese Government had serious consequences for the Church's capacity to function and serve the community, as well as for the welfare of the population that relied on the Church's services.

Reflection on the Relationship Between the Catholic Church and the Vietnamese Government in Light of Justice, Charity, and Faith

No bishop Gives Up the Flock

Cardinal Nguyen Van Thuan accepted being imprisoned to fulfill his mission as a shepherd, following Jesus' teaching that "I will lay down my life for the sheep."[9] This was just one example among many bishops and priests who chose to stay in Vietnam to uphold the Church's existence in the country. "Xung quanh biến cố 30.4.1975, không một giám mục nào ở miền Nam rời bỏ đất nước và đoàn chiên của mình." [Around April 30, 1975, not a single bishop in the South left his country and his flock].[10] This reality reflected the resolute stance of the Bishops in Vietnam, who refused to leave their mission and their congregation during this challenging time. This unwavering dedication to their mission exemplifies the strength and determination of these religious leaders in the face of adversity. It also signifies the strong Faith of Vietnamese Catholics.

This event may establish a relation to Bartolomé de Las Casas' determination and perseverance in fighting for the

9. Jn 10:15 (NAB).

10. Công Đức Lê, "Nhìn Lại Giáo Hội Việt Nam 60 Năm Qua - Nhận Diện Những Cơ Hội Và Những Thách Đố Hiện Nay [Looking Back At The Last 60 Years Of The Vietnamese Church - Identifying Current Opportunities And Challenges]," *Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam*, May 8, 2021, https://hdgmvietnam.com/chi-tiet/nhin-lai-giao-hoi-viet-nam-60-nam-qua-nhan-dien-nhung-co-hoi-va-nhung-thach-do-hien-nay-41882#_Toc71356557.

freedom of the Indians. He saw "the bleeding underside of the tapestry. And he devoted his life to healing it."[11] His unwavering commitment to justice, coupled with his resilience in the face of opposition, cemented his legacy as a champion for the rights of indigenous people and a pivotal figure in the early advocacy for human rights.

At that time, all Vietnamese clergy demonstrated remarkable faithfulness to the Church and the message of the Gospel, especially during challenging times. This unwavering dedication exemplified their commitment to evangelization. This is also a demonstration of hope that is expressed in *Gaudium et Spes*: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ."[12] Despite facing challenges, the Vietnamese Church holds the belief that through unwavering faith in Christ, it is possible to seek genuine justice and love while yearning for a future filled with trust and charity. Indeed, this path is lengthy and demands considerable sacrifice and steadfastness.

The Way of the Living Word

The Church of Vietnam is strongly connected to the pursuit of embodying and following God's way. This connection is especially evident in the practices and beliefs of the Vietnamese Catholic Church. The principles of the Living Word have been consistently upheld by this faith community, guaranteeing

11. Bartolome de las Casas, *The Only Way*, ed. Helen Parish, trans. Francis Patrick Sullivan (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 11.

12. Vatican II, *Pastoral Constitution On The Church In The Modern World* (Gaudium Et Spes), December 7, 1965, no. 1, Vatican Archive, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

that their actions and outreach are based on the teachings and love demonstrated by Jesus Christ.

Central to the Vietnamese Catholic ethos is a profound commitment to the Word of God, which has guided the Church's engagement with the wider society. This dedication manifests in a range of activities aimed at uplifting and supporting the community, emphasizing the heavenly values that the Church seeks to bring into the context of Vietnam. The Church's focus is not on political involvement but instead on contributing positively through education, charity works, and promoting religious dialogues, thereby embodying obedience to the Mother Church in a manner that keeps it aloof from political entanglements.

The relationship between the Vietnamese Catholic Church and the government is intricate, especially considering the government's attempts to restrict the Church's activities. Despite facing such obstacles, the Church remains patient and resolute in its commitment to a path of love – a love that even extends to those seen as opponents. This unwavering adherence to the teachings of Jesus, particularly the lessons on responding nonviolently[13], emphasizes the Church's devotion to peaceful and friendly interaction with all sectors of society.

Historical figures like Chrysostom have emphasized the importance of ideal missionaries who, "win the friendship of those who hate us by our unfailing charity. Gentleness is powerful."[14] The Vietnamese Catholics adopt a similar perspective, seeking to interact with the Vietnamese government as potential friends in collaboration. This method of constructing

13. Mt 5:38-42 (NAB).

14. Francis Patrick Sullivan, *Indian Freedom: The Cause of Bartolomé de Las Casas, 1484-1566 : A Reader* (Kansas city: Sheed and Ward, 1995), 208.

connections instead of barriers has promoted a developing comprehension and faith between the Church and different sectors of Vietnamese society, demonstrating the effect of conversation and companionship.

The commitment of the Vietnamese Catholic Church to live according to the teachings of the Gospel has resulted in significant achievements in evangelization. By placing importance on the teachings of Jesus and living out the virtues such as patience, love, charity, and faithfulness, the Church has not only encouraged harmony and understanding within Vietnam. It has also made valuable contributions to the social and spiritual well-being of the community. Through these efforts, the Church demonstrates how adhering to the message of the Gospel can bring about transformation in societies, bridging gaps and fostering a culture of peace and mutual respect.

COVID-19 Pandemic and Fruitful Cooperation

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in 2019, was the most devastating crisis worldwide in recent years. It has affected countless lives, disrupted the global economy, and posed a challenge to the healthcare systems across many nations. Vietnam also experienced significant repercussions from the pandemic, including a high number of fatalities, infections, and enforced lockdowns. During this challenging time, the Church in Vietnam demonstrated its unity and collaboration with the government and society in the battle against the pandemic, reflecting with the message conveyed by Pope Francis in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*.

In his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis highlights the interconnectedness of all human beings and the importance of brotherhood and social companionship in light of the worldwide obstacles. He writes: "True, a worldwide tragedy like the

Covid-19 pandemic momentarily revived the sense that we are a global community, all in the same boat, where one person's problems are the problems of all. Once more we realized that no one is saved alone; we can only be saved together."[15] This message resonates with the Vietnamese Catholics, who have a long history of suffering and resilience, as well as a strong sense of community and faith.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Vietnamese Catholics have made significant endeavors to contribute to the fight against the virus, working together with the government. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam (CBCV) has issued pastoral letters and statements urging both the faithful and the general public to adhere to health guidelines, pray for the end of the pandemic, and provide support to the vulnerable and the needy.[16] The CBCV has also provided financial assistance and equipment to the government and the health sector, encouraging parishes and religious communities to participate in relief efforts.

The Church made a significant contribution through the voluntary service of many Vietnamese religious individuals. They offered to care for COVID-19 patients in specific hospitals, despite the risks of exposure to a potentially deadly virus. Some of these religious individuals contracted the COVID-19 virus and even died from the infection while working in the

15. Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter Fratelli Tutti Of The Holy Father Francis On Fraternity And Social Friendship*, October 3, 2020, Encyclicals, no. 32, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

16. CBCV, "Hội Đồng Giám Mục Việt Nam: Thư Gửi Cộng Đồng Dân Chúa (05-05-2020) [Conference Of Bishops Of Vietnam: Letter To The Community Of God's People (May 5, 2020)]," *Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam*, May 5, 2020, https://hdgmvietnam.com/chi-tiet/hoi-dong-giam-muc-viet-nam-thu-gui-cong-dong-dan-chua-05-05-2020--39838.

hospital.[17] They selflessly gave their lives for the well-being of others, following the example of Christ and the saints. The government and society recognized and appreciated their heroic service. The Church in Vietnam played a significant role in combating the COVID-19 pandemic, alongside the nation's efforts to overcome the crisis.

The remarkable contributions of the Church in Vietnam are trying to help the Vietnamese society and government recognize the true value of the Gospel that Vietnamese Catholics are spreading within the country. As a result, the government and the Church in Vietnam developed a mutual understanding and trust, facilitating improved dialogue and cooperation for the future. Therefore, the Covid-19 pandemic was not only a challenge but also an opportunity for the Church in Vietnam to demonstrate its faith and love in action.

Justice and Charity

In the society of Vietnam, the Catholic Church remains a beacon of hope and a steadfast proponent of the Gospel's values. With a mission deeply rooted in the virtues of justice and charity, the Church tirelessly works to embody the compassionate spirit of Christ's teachings. Its approach to truth is not one of contention or confrontation; rather, it is a gentle invitation to experience the transformative power of God's love.

Vietnamese Catholics are making a substantial contribution to Vietnamese society by engaging in numerous charitable activities. Inspired by the teachings of the Gospel, they actively engage in initiatives that prioritize helping the less fortunate and marginalized members of their community. From running

17. Quynh Trang, "Hàng Trăm Tu Sĩ Công Giáo Tham Gia Tuyến Đầu Chống Dịch [Hundreds of Catholic Religious Joined the Front Line in Fighting the Epidemic]," July 23, 2021, https://plo.vn/hang-tram-tu-si-cong-giao-tham-gia-tuyen-dau-chong-dich-post638567.html.

shelters for the homeless to organizing food drives for those in need, Vietnamese Catholics demonstrate a deep commitment to serving others with love and compassion. Their dedication to charity not only provides essential support to those facing hardships but also serves as a shining example of selfless giving and kindness in Vietnamese society.

The Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI) is engaged in charitable work in Vietnam through various activities, particularly by establishing a Charity Home for poor children, including those from ethnic minority backgrounds. At present, Charity Home is providing care for 70 children, comprising orphans and those from extremely disadvantaged situations. Within this group, there are 04 children from the Ma ethnic community, 06 from the H' Mong ethnic group, 29 from the M'Nong ethnic group, and 31 from the Kinh ethnic group.[18] The Vietnamese government has acknowledged the contributions of the OMI. It has granted permission for them to conduct missionary work across Vietnam without any constraints. This development signifies the growing trust of the Vietnamese authorities in missionary congregations operating within the country.

Additionally, Vietnamese Catholics are providing care for those affected by leprosy and HIV/AIDS. The task of caring for these patients is both challenging and risky. Furthermore, these individuals often face social discrimination. As a result, there is a limited number of individuals willing to work in this sector. However, Vietnamese Catholics, particularly religious, demonstrate a willingness to serve in healthcare centers taking care of those with HIV. The care of individuals living with HIV/AIDS is a key point for dioceses and religious

18. Xuan Hien Ngo, "Nhà Tình Thương O.M.I. [Charity Home O.M.I.]," *O.M.I. Vietnam*, May 17, 2022, https://donghiensi.com/bai-viet/nha-tinh-thuong-ho-dao-bung/852.

congregations. For instance, in 2005, "Mai Tam House" in Thu Duc District, operated by The Camillians, and Mai Hoa Center, run by the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, was established to support patients in the advanced stages of HIV/AIDS. Similarly, Mai Tam House in Phu Nhuan, managed by the Pastoral Department of the Archdiocese of Ho Chi Minh City, provides care for individuals with terminal-stage HIV/AIDS.[19] Certainly, the involvement of Catholic laity is crucial in these charitable endeavors as they work alongside the religious to share God's love with all. These initiatives represent just a fraction of the numerous charitable endeavors undertaken by Vietnamese Catholics.

Caritas in Veritate

The Church of Vietnam plays a crucial role in advocating for human dignity within Vietnamese society. The Vietnamese Church frequently addresses the importance of preserving the environment and supporting the marginalized individuals affected by climate change and environmental pollution. The Bishops' Conference of Vietnam consistently highlights the significance of freedom of religion as a fundamental right, urging all to respect this freedom stated in the Constitution of Vietnam.[20] Additionally, the Church actively engages in initiatives aimed at safeguarding the well-being of children,

19. Phú Lợi Nguyễn, "Vai Trò Của Người Công Giáo Tham Gia Vào Công Tác Xã Hội Trên Lĩnh Vực Giáo Dục, y Tế và Bảo Trợ Xã Hội, Từ Thiện Nhân Đạo [The Role of Catholics Participating in Social Work in the Fields of Education, Health, Social Protection, and Humanitarian Charity]," *Vietnam Government Committee for Religious Affairs*, January 5, 2021, https://btgcp.gov.vn/tin-bai-nghien-cuu-va-trao-doi-y-kien-cua-doc-gia/vai-tro-cua-nguoi-cong-giao-tham-gia-vao-cong-tac-xa-hoi-tren-linh-vuc-giao-duc-y-te-va-bao-tro-xa-hoi-tu-thien-nhan-dao-postZQR82OMqdA.html.

20. The National Assembly Of Vietnam, *The Constitution Of The Socialist Republic Of Vietnam*, no. 24.

women, and other vulnerable ones from exploitation and mistreatment.

While the Church "cannot and must not replace the State,"[21] She continues to put in significant effort for justice and the common good, issues the Church deeply cares about. The Vietnamese Church is willing to speak against sins, but not to condemn sinners. Furthermore, The Church is prepared to dedicate itself to enhancing social issues in Vietnam, even if it means making sacrifices for the greater good. "A Christian knows when it is time to speak of God and when it is better to say nothing and to let love alone speak."[22] Truly, on many occasions, expressing love through actions holds greater significance than mere words. Love has been expressed and significantly contributed to the mutual understanding between the Church and the Vietnamese state.

ENCOUNTER

Encounter holds a significant importance in fostering mutual understanding. In this light, the relationship between Vietnam and the Vatican has improved significantly due to regular annual exchanges. In July 2023, President Vo Van Thuong and Pope Francis, during a visit to the Vatican, announced the agreement between the two sides regarding a permanent resident Papal representative in Vietnam. This marks the first time in history that an official permanent representative of the Holy See has been established in Vietnam. Furthermore, from April 9 to 14, 2024, Archbishop Paul Richard

21. Pope Benedict XVI, *Encyclical Letter Deus Caritas est of the Supreme Pontiff Benedict XVIe to the Bishops, Priests, and Deacons, Men and Women Religious, and all the Lay Faithful on Christian Love,* December 5, 2005, Vatican Archive, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html, no. 28.

22. Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas est*, no. 31.

Gallagher, the Vatican's Secretary for Relations with States, visited Vietnam, representing the first visit by a Vatican foreign minister to the country. The positive developments in the relationship between Vietnam and the Vatican demonstrate that conflicts and disparities can be resolved through love and a willingness to engage and exchange perspectives in the spirit of the Gospel. The local Church of Vietnam plays a significant role in fostering the connection between the Vatican and the Vietnamese government, promoting encounters, dialogue, and the love of Christ.

The Church's actions are not directed against any individual or authority; instead, they are an open embrace, extending God's benevolent presence to all, regardless of their status or belief. In this way, the Church in Vietnam seeks to be a living testament to the Gospel, fostering a society where the light of truth and the warmth of love are freely shared among its people.

Efforts Towards A Promising Future

Always Seeking Peace through Dialogue

The Christian faith is not a "religion of the book." Christianity is the religion of the "Word" of God, a word which is "not a written and mute word, but the Word which is incarnate and living."[23] Accordingly, the living Word of God must be lived out with the constant pursuit of peace through dialogues and encounters, fostering mutual understanding and respect. The same principle applies to the relationship between the Church and the Vietnamese government. In Vietnam, the Church consistently engages in dialogue with the government at various levels, from national to local. While the Church

23. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Makati: Word & Life Publications, 1997), no. 108.

does not allow governmental interference in its activities, it acknowledges the state's administrative jurisdiction. Through open and sincere dialogues, the Vietnamese government gradually comprehended that the Church's mission does not pose a threat to the political structure. The Church in Vietnam remains independent from any political entity, advocating solely for the Only Way of Christ: Faith, Hope, and Love. Emphasizing unwavering loyalty to the Holy Father and the Holy See, the Vietnamese Church has gained the state's understanding and acceptance. The progress in this relationship highlights the significance of pursuing peace through dialogue. This relationship between the Church and the Vietnamese government demonstrates that through respectful communication and mutual understanding, even seemingly conflicting institutions can find common ground and work towards the common good. The commitment to dialogue and the recognition of each other's autonomy and responsibilities have led to a peaceful coexistence and collaboration that benefits society. It showcases the power of diplomacy and communication in resolving differences and building trust and cooperation for a better future.

The Spirit of Synodality: Collaboration

In the context of the relationship between the local church and the state, synodality promotes the idea of the Church as a dynamic and active participant in the broader community. The Church is called to be a protagonist of mission and to activate the ministries and charisms present in her life. This suggests that the Church is not isolated from the world, but rather engaged in dialogue and collaboration with the state and society to promote the common good and contribute to the well-being of all people.

Synodality, as expressed in the ecclesiology of communion, highlights the active role of all members of the Church, including the faithful and the bishops, in working together towards the mission of the Church. This implies a sense of co-responsibility and participation in decision-making processes, as well as a recognition of the diverse gifts and charisms present in the Church. [24]

Las Casas consistently affirmed and preached the Good News that salvation is inclusive and available to all. His teachings stress the universality of salvation and the need to share the Gospel with everyone. This principle is also highlighted in the concept of Synodality. All individuals are viewed as God's children and as brothers and sisters, regardless of their religion or ethnicity. This mindset plays a crucial role in the Catholic Church in Vietnam to engage in the country's social dynamics, assisting all sectors of Vietnamese society in comprehending the Church's mission. Subsequently, Vietnamese Catholics have continued to collaborate in a spirit of unity with individuals of various faiths in Vietnam. Furthermore, living out the spirit of Synodality within the Vietnamese church is crucial for enhancing collaboration with the Vietnamese state and other sectors of Vietnamese society.

Conclusion

The relationship between the Catholic Church and the state in Vietnam has undergone significant evolution and challenges since the unification of the country in 1975. The complex dynamics and historical context have shaped the interactions between the Church and the government, leading

24. International Theological Commission, "Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church," 2018, nos. 6–9, Vatican, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html.

to periods of tension, restrictions, and mistrust. However, amidst these difficulties, the Vietnamese Church has demonstrated unwavering faith, perseverance, and a commitment to the values of justice, charity, and faith. The Church's efforts to engage in dialogue, collaboration, and social outreach have contributed to the gradual improvement in relations with the Vietnamese government, leading to greater understanding and cooperation. Specifically, the Church's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, its advocacy for human dignity, and its dedication to the teachings of the Gospel have showcased its positive impact on Vietnamese society and its commitment to fostering peace, mutual respect, and a culture of love and understanding.

Furthermore, the principles of synodality and dialogue have provided valuable lessons for the Church's engagement with the Vietnamese government. The Church's unwavering commitment to its mission, despite challenges and persecution, serves as a source of inspiration and encouragement. The ongoing journey towards reconciliation and mutual understanding between the Church and the government highlights the potential for positive transformation and collaboration. As the Church continues to uphold the values of justice, charity, and faith, it remains dedicated to fostering a society where the light of truth and the warmth of love are freely shared among its people. The evolving relationship between the Catholic Church and the state in Vietnam reflects the power of faith, perseverance, and the pursuit of peace through dialogue and encounter, offering hope for a promising future of mutual respect and cooperation.

UKRAINIAN INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS AND THEIR JOURNEY OF CHRISTIAN HOPE

Pamela A. Tuason, C.C.N.

Introduction

This study is about the personal narratives of eighteen internally displaced persons, IDPs, of Ukraine, generated by the onset of war on February 24, 2022. IDPs are:

> Persons or groups of persons who have been forced or (IDPs) obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border.[1]

So, for this study, any Ukrainian who was internally displaced at least once is considered an IDP, even when they have eventually emigrated to another country. Nevertheless, their unfortunate conditions do not entirely make them mere "poor who need help" because, despite the tragic circumstances, they remain persons bearing divine grace.[2] For this reason, the experiences of Ukrainian IDPs are also possible subjects of theological studies. Thus, this paper is devoted to unpacking the displacement experiences of the eighteen

1. Francis M. Deng and UNHCR, *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*, 2nd ed. (Geneva: United Nations Publication, 2004).

2. Salvador Agualada Jr., C.M.F., "Examining Karl Rahner's Theology of Religions, Its Meaning and Implications, in the Asian Context" [Lecture notes, Loyola School of Theology, 2021].

participating Ukrainian IDPs as a *locus theologicus*; showing that, as bearers of the divine grace of hope, the Ukrainian IDPs are capable of imparting knowledge of God and contributing to a better understanding of the Christian faith.

To accomplish this task, Jürgen Moltmann's theology of hope is foundational. A German Reformed systematic theologian, Moltmann placed the Christian hope at the center of his theological works. Thus, through the theology of hope, a positive outlook regarding the catastrophic experiences of the displaced Ukrainians is accorded. It should also be emphasized that Moltmann's theology of hope was experientially conceived. Personal events in Moltmann's life inspired his theology.[3] However, theologizing with Moltmann would not have been possible without the mimetic theory of Paul Ricoeur.[4] Utilizing Ricoeur's mimesis concept will provide this study with the means to draw out the displaced Ukrainians' understanding of their current state through their narratives.

Ricoeur defined *mimesis* as the active process of imitation or representation. Thus, imitation or representation should be understood in its dynamic sense of representation and transposition into representative works.[5] In this study's case, these representative works are the responses of the participating Ukrainian IDPs. Ricoeur believed that a hermeneutical approach to narratives deals primarily with a past that engages the present for the future and not just a mere temporal past.[6] This is why Ricoeur's notion of mimesis is the method for having a holistic understanding of the Ukrainian

3. Cf. Prelude to Refiguration.

4. A French philosopher of the twentieth century known for hermeneutics.

5. Paul Ricoeur, Temps et Récit, vol. 1 (Paris: Seuil, 1983), 58.

6. David B. Perrin, "La mimesi come terreno comune per la spiritualità e la teologia spirituale," Mysterion 12, no. 2 (2019): 192.

IDPs' experiences. This mimetic cycle comprises three phases: *mimesis1* or prefiguration; *mimesis2* or configuration; and *mimesis3* or refiguration. Prefiguration, *mimesis1*, allows the pre-understanding of the Ukrainian IDPs' world and context. It is the part of the research that speaks about the history of the Ukrainian people as it influences their current situation. This study means understanding the IDPs through their history. For Ricoeur, human actions contain meanings that can be extracted.[7] Moreover, *mimesis1* has a diachronic character that allows the integration of new elements, coming from different points of view, to actualize existing meanings. Thus, history's temporal character contributes to and complements its significance as well. Configuration, *mimesis2*, is what Ricoeur called the world of *what-ifs*.[8] This is so because, with the narratives put into words, the search for the meaning behind the text necessitates creativity and resourcefulness to identify the *emplotment*—the process of organizing events and facts in a way that causal connections are established, which is the mediating stage of the mimetic cycle.[9] This emplotment was done by each Ukrainian IDP respondent while answering the online questions. Though the questions were the same for all, each respondent structured and communicated their story in a way unique to each other. Refiguration or *mimesis3* is "where the reader engages the world of the text."[10] "The act of reading follows the configuration process and actualizes it. It is an act of judgment and the productive imagination."[11] Refiguration

7. Ricoeur, Temps 1, 69.

8. Ricoeur, Temps 1, 101.

9. Ricoeur, Temps 1, 102.

10. Carmen Valdes, *"Candles in Babylon": The Imagination of Hope in the Religious Poetry of Denise Levertov* (Berkeley, California: ProQuest Information and Learning Company, 2005), 19.

11. Loretta Dornisch, "Ricoeur's Theory of Mimesis," 315.

is the stage where the reader, in this case, this study's author, understands and assimilates the meaning perceived. The mimetic cycle is not complete without refiguration because it is where the meaning of the narrative is brought back to the field of action for further interpretation. Thus, here, the reader undergoes a change in oneself because of his/her assimilation of what he/she has read and understood. The completion of this stage restarts another mimetic cycle.

As this study focuses on the personal stories of eighteen displaced Ukrainians, it becomes a channel that allows the respondent to reflect, review, and reassess their experiences. As a result, they are encouraged to remain resilient and to continue hoping for the end of the war. Most importantly, their reflections help welcome cities to better accept and integrate them into their societies by pointing out injustices and calling for change. Consequently, the displaced Ukrainians can finally start contributing to improving their welcoming societies. Moreover, this study allows the respondents, through their participation, and this paper's author, through this study, to have a deeper look into the trauma experienced in forced displacement during wars. Through this process, lessons and connotations from their stories are waiting to be mined out and shared with the world, thus providing a possible new model to help churches and organizations achieve holistic ministering to them as contributors to the church's life as well. Lastly, this study will highlight the relevance and importance of having the experiences of migrants as its primary source in doing a theology of migration, thus providing a new tool for doing migration theology.

Prefiguration: Ukraine's History

The stories of Ukrainian IDPs show how eighteen people were able to act according to what they believed was necessary

to survive Russia's aggressions against their country. Delving deeper into their stories led to a discovery of diverse elements of the country's history that helped fuel the nationalism of Ukrainians. Over the course of their history, the people of Ukraine have consistently expressed a profound yearning for their national identity. The pursuit of this national identity has been recounted from various perspectives, offering numerous insights into the ongoing search for Ukraine's sense of self. This quest can be traced back to the tenth century when the Kyivan Rus' state was established: "Ukrainian history teaches that the founding of Kyivan Rus' was the beginning of the Ukrainian state and the start of Kyiv's rise to power" and that "the main avenue through this territory was the Dnipro, [...] and the capital Kyiv was in the south-center".[12]

Founding Era

The Kyivan Rus' glory was short-lived as it became entangled in political conflicts. Kyiv fell into powers that did not embody the aspirations of the Kyivan Rus'. But as the history of Kyivan Rus' transcends the Ukrainian narrative, the same is said of the River Dnipro. Neither can be exclusively claimed or owned by a single nation or state. However, Ukrainians claim that the Dnipro had been a metaphor for Ukraine's relentless quest for self-determination during centuries of foreign rule, and for the fighting spirit of Ukrainians against oppressors as represented by the Zaporozhian Cossacks, who rebelled against foreign rulers from their stronghold at Sich.[13]

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12. Andrew Wilson, *The Ukrainians: Unexpected Nation,* 4th ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press) *2015, 43.*

13. Roman Adrian Cybriwsky, *Along Ukraine's River: A Social and Environmental History of the Dnipro* (Central European University Press, 2018), 16.

A cossack is "anyone who could not find his appropriate place in society and went into the steppes, where he acknowledged no authority," or armed men engaged in military service in Italian colonies on the Black Sea coast. [14] And the most prominent Cossacks were those from beyond the Dnipro rapids—the Ukrainian Cossacks.[15] They became forebearers of the Ukrainian identity, although they did not always succeed in winning their freedom, until its dissolution in the early 20th century.[16] Nevertheless, cossackdom has been deemed synonymous with the Ukrainian way of life.[17]

Along the same line, the appellation West and East of the River Dnipro came from its geographical position in terms of the River Dnipro: the right and left banks of the river, respectively. This distinction mainly emphasizes the cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious differences more than the geographical aspect. In simple terms, Western Ukraine is more disposed to the European mindset due to its prolonged exposure to the Western mindset of the Poles, while Eastern Ukraine is more inclined towards the Russian mindset. This difference became more palpable at the onset of modern nationalism.[18] Western Ukraine's assimilation of the European mentality led it to

14. Orest Subtelny and Illia Vytanovych, "Cossacks," in *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, accessed October 16, 2023, https://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?linkpath=pages%5CC% 5CO%5C Cossacks.htm.

15. Serhii Plokhy, *The Cossack Myth: History and Nationhood in the Age of Empires,* New Studies in European History (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 32.

16. Wilson, *The Ukrainians,* 62; Orest Subtelny and Illia Vytanovych, "Cossacks," in Encyclopedia of Ukraine, accessed October 16, 2023, https://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/ display.asp?linkpath=pages%5CC%5CO%5CCossacks.htm.

17. Mykhailo Hrushevsky, *History of Ukraine-Rus* Volume 7: The Cossack Age to 1625, The Cossack Age, 59-64.

18. Timothy Baycroft and Mark Hewitson, *What Is a Nation?: Europe 1789-1914*, 2006), 20.

adopt this, while Ukraine's eastern counterpart, ruled by the Romanovs, struggled with it. In addition, Ukrainian nationalism was defined alongside religion, specifically Christianity, be it Orthodoxy on the side of the Russian Empire or Catholicism in the western part of Ukraine. The imposition of Communism and the Russian language was regarded as an opposition to Ukrainian nationalism. Thus, subsequent attempts to establish national identity yielded an antagonism against Communism in Soviet Ukraine.[19]

Modern Ukraine

Despite all that happened in the first half of the twentieth century, Ukraine's nationalism and struggle for independence bore fruit when it attained self-proclaimed independence on August 24, 1991.[20] Nevertheless, Russia's influence over Ukraine continued to affect the latter's politics, which was geared towards European integration. Russia was against this because that would mean Ukraine would move farther away from the East, more specifically from Russia. However, in 2013, when Ukraine was approaching an agreement with the European Union (EU), its then-President, Viktor Yanukovych, suddenly stopped negotiations with the EU and made other agreements with Russia. This move led to protests in Kyiv in November 2013, dubbed the Euromaidan. [21]

Since the occupation of the Crimean Peninsula and some parts of the Donbas Region in 2014 until late 2021, tensions between Ukraine and Russia continued to escalate. Until such

19. David R. Marples, *Heroes and Villains: Creating National History in Contemporary Ukraine* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2007), 3-5.

20. This was confirmed on December 1, 1991, by a referendum and the election of a new president.

21. Wilson, *The Ukrainians,* 348.

a time that these tensions finally deteriorated into a full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022.[22] Naturally, most Ukrainians in the country moved away from the conflict zones. But as Ukrainians evaded the threats brought by the war, they showed a preference for moving westward, and the eighteen personal narratives will confirm this.

The stories in this study reflect a Westward preference regarding displacement. After so many decades of hardships in the Soviet Union, Ukraine acknowledged that the kind of governance it seeks is somewhere else. And the only other example and experience they have is with the West. Ukraine's history shows it is more than ready to be an independent nation, eventually steering farther away from Russia.

Configuration: Eighteen Narratives

The onset of the war in 2022 produced more displacements in Ukraine. It is a tragedy to know that some have been displaced since 2014 and have not been fully integrated into the host communities. This is a tragedy since that means there are Ukrainians who are continuously suffering the effects of their forced displacement for ten years.[23]

Crisis and Trauma

In general, the common factor that is shared by IDPs of conflicts and war is fear. This was established through the narratives gathered for this paper. Those fears were undoubtedly caused by the danger and threat perceived by

22. Nigel Walker, "Conflict in Ukraine: A Timeline (2014 - Eve of 2022 Invasion)" (UK Parliament, August 22, 2023), 15-26.

23. "'Tomorrow, Tomorrow, Putin Will Come': The 2014 Ukraine Refugees Forced to Flee for a Second Time," *The Guardian,* June 6, 2022, sec. Global development, https://www. theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jun/06/tomorrow-tomorrow-putin-will-come-the-2014-ukraine-refugees-forced-to-flee-for-a-second-time.

the respondents. When they felt the threat to their lives, they instinctively knew they had to move to a safer place. In the case of these respondents, where they are in Ukraine, whether close to the borders with Russia or far from it, it did not matter. What mattered was that they considered a place secure. This contributed to the disparate movements of the respondents. The uniqueness of each displacement experience, including their reactions and initiatives regarding their displacement, was brought about by their backgrounds and history.

Indeed, each of them struggled the best way they could in the given situations they found themselves in. They adapted because it was necessary for survival. This is explained by a statement from an article that highlights the need to investigate the spiritual and religious needs of Ukrainian refugees. Although this was concluded for refugees, it applies as well to IDPs.

In crises, people often make a deep reflection on their lives, over the sense and purpose of life, and in this way verify their current behavior, trying to juxtapose it with one's conscious immediate and further goals and the meaning of their activities and very existence. Viewed in this way, a crisis often leads to a change in thinking and undertaking decisions based on rethought values and premises.[24]

Life and Self Re-assessment

It is obvious that the participants of the online questionnaire underwent an inner transformation since life-changing decisions such as the ones they took necessitate reflection and repeated reconsideration before their concretization. Along

24. Michał Wyrostkiewicz, Wojciech Wciseł, and Anastasiia Verkhovetska, "The Need for Religious and Spiritual Counseling Among Ukraine's War Refugees," *Journal for the Study of Religion & Ideologies 21,* no. 62 (2022): 4.

the same line, their narratives reflect the presence of others in the transformation of these respondents. In other words, the respondents were able to shift their paradigm in seeing their lives because others helped them, implicitly or explicitly. Thus, their statements revealed how encountering other persons can counter negative prejudices.

Forced displacement will always be hard, and a displaced person will constantly need help. The narratives of encounters with others show that experiences involving others contribute immensely to the conduct and outlook of the respondents. For example, when the experience with others is positive, the behavior of the respondent tends to be characterized by openness to society. On the contrary, negative experiences tend to discourage them from interpersonal contact with others.

In addition, a positive experience with others fosters a feeling of being welcomed and treated as equals in terms of rights and privileges. Thus, it can be assumed that when an IDP feels welcomed, he or she will more probably consider integration into their welcoming society. Otherwise, he or she will likely think of moving on somewhere else, even if that means re-living displacement all over again.

One establishes a foothold where one feels a sense of belonging. So, if one cannot procure one's own house in a certain place, one will not have a sense of belonging there. Therefore, through the narratives, having a house has been proven to be more than a physical shelter or economic asset, but also a place that provides a sense of security and familiarity. In other words, for a displaced person, "home 'is a site in which power relations of the wider society...are played out."[25]

25. Jane R. Zavisca, Beth Mitchneck, and Theodore P. Gerber, "Housing and Integration of Internally Displaced Persons: The Case of Ukraine in 2018," *Frontiers in Human Dynamics* 5 (April 5, 2023), https://doi.org/10.3389/fhumd.2023.1086064, 2.

Displaced and Homeward Bound

The interpretations of the narratives show that displacement is not only a forced movement made by a person in difficulty: it is also emotional and spiritual, in addition to being geographical. And these persons, despite their trying conditions, still manage to be grateful and hopeful for the future. This is possible because others have helped them. The respondents are homeless but never alone. For them, the best-updated definition of home includes "the affective experiences of interpersonal relationships with persons one associates with *feeling at home*." [26]

The experiences of these displaced Ukrainians revealed the spiritual and emotional sides of their journeys. They continue to desire a home despite feeling welcomed in their host communities. That is because "home is both a place and a unique source of attachments, desires, needs, and dilemmas that undergird the rest of our lives."[27] Thus, they will continue yearning for a home amidst their continuous displacement struggles.

Refiguration: Theological Interpretations of the Narratives

The personal narratives of the Ukrainian IDPs clearly describe their state of homelessness. Consequently, they yearn for a home reminiscent of the one they were forced to abandon because of the war. Deep within their minds and hearts, they foster hope for a home mirroring the one they left behind, embodying the same quality and features of their familiar way of life. Statements like "home is home. Home is better,"

26. Barbara Jo McClure, "Carrying Home: Theoretical and Theological Reflections on the Politics of Attachment and Belonging," *Pastoral Psychology* 70, no. 3 (June 2021), 242.

27. McClure, "Carrying Home", 243.

and "there is no place better than home" clearly describe the eagerness to return home.[28] While waiting for the end of the war, some find their condition precarious; having been compelled to leave their homes, they also struggle as strangers in a foreign land, though they remain within the borders of their motherland.

Strangers in Their Homeland

Such is the case of Respondent 6, who wrote, "I was surprised by the Russian language on the street, parents who continue to speak Russian to their children. Collaborators and traitors who aim shots at their neighbors." But the reality is that those speaking Russian in Kyiv are also Ukrainians. This exemplifies the tension between the host communities and the displaced. Respondent 6 left Kyiv for a safer place in western Ukraine and abroad. Upon returning to Kyiv, eastern Ukrainians who speak Russian, inhabited the capital to escape the dangers of the war. Respondent 6, therefore, became one of the locals who must welcome the displaced. Respondent 6 witnessed how Russian-speaking Ukrainians were able to assimilate the way of life in Kyiv. In this case, it is important to note how Respondent 6 passed from being displaced to being a host upon returning to Kyiv. Respondent 6 realized how much help IDPs need. So, in return, Respondent 6 has learned how to welcome even Russian-speaking people, who seemed to be strangers, as compatriots and help them be integrated into society.

Despite sharing the same citizenship with the rest of the country, these Ukrainian IDPs feel like strangers in their federal lands. Thus, the sense of being foreigners in their own country reminds us of the Christian life in the second century, when Christianity was a nascent religion: being strangers in

28. Respondents 3 and 7, respectively.

this world because Christians belong to the kingdom of God that is to come. It is best described in the Letter to Diognetus:

> They reside in their respective countries, but only as aliens. They take part in everything as citizens and put up with everything as foreigners. Every foreign land is their home, and every home a foreign land. [...] They find themselves in the flesh but do not live according to the flesh. They spend their days on earth but hold citizenship in heaven.[29]

In this sense, we can say that the experiences of the Ukrainian IDPs are a metaphor for the Christian life on earth.[30] Like a believer in Christ, Ukrainian IDPs long for a home that is not within reach or currently attainable. Thus, they continue to anticipate that home, which is not the one they are in. That home is elsewhere. They might inhabit a space in the Ukrainian land, but do not feel they entirely belong there.

Because of these diverse realities during displacement, the Catholic Church calls for the welfare of the migrants by seeing them as persons with a name and a history.[31] As a person, the forcibly displaced is also a spiritual being capable

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29. Papias Hierapolitanus, *The Didache, the Epistle of Barnabas, the Epistles and the Martyrdom of St. Polycarp, the Fragments of Papias, the Epistle to Diognetus,* ed. James Aloysius Kleist, S.J. Ancient Christian Writers 006 (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1948), 39.

30. For this purpose, metaphor is defined as the "kind of language [that] reaches out beyond the existing reality into the sphere of the possible." (Jürgen Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology: Ways and Forms of Christian Theology* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2000]). Thus, the personal experiences of the Ukrainian IDPs are taken as concrete expressions of what they are not explicitly: experiences of Christian life.

31. Papa Francesco, "Ai Partecipanti al VII Congresso Mondiale della Pastorale dei Migranti" (Ciità del Vaticano, November 21, 2014), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2014/november/documents/papa-francesco_20141121_congresso-pastorale-migranti.html.

of divine transcendence.[32] Hence, as persons recognized by the Catholic Church, the Ukrainian IDPs contribute to developing and enriching their welcoming society. As such, the Ukrainian IDPs can be channels through which God's graces pass. Thus, understanding their personal stories does not just uncover the urgency to extend help: their experiences can be a source of theological elements that can contribute to a better understanding of the Christian faith amid the suffering of war and conflicts of today's world. In considering their experiences as *locus theologicus*, they reveal the workings of God's grace in the material world. Unfortunately for them, each day represents the unknown, so every day, they must hope that this time will be better. So, when Respondent 10 wrote "believe in the best, do not lose hope, support others," it was clear that there was a realization that hope is possible because others are present, whether that presence is to be helped or to be of help. Hence, the homebound Ukrainian IDPs embody the exilic situation of Christians on earth, awaiting the time when they can finally be home, with the Creator and others of creation.

Homing with Others

At the same time, the respondents could identify how important others are, be it their family, loved ones, friends, or strangers willing to help. Respondent 3 stated the importance of being close to family and encouraging people during hard times: "We surround ourselves with positive people. Our grandmother and relatives live in Sumy, so now we are closer to them and have more contact." "I have a duty to my country and my people, and I am motivated by the idea of justice and the fact that evil is always punished. My family and friends are

32. Michał Wyrostkiewicz, Wojciech Wciseł, and Anastasiia Verkhovetska, "The Need for Religious and Spiritual Counseling Among Ukraine's War Refugees," *Journal for the Study of Religion & Ideologies* 21, no. 62 (2022): 3–19.

with me," Respondent 11 shared how helping others became a job motivation. For some, it was through others that made they realize how important faith is.

These Ukrainian IDPs lost their homes, and yet were welcomed by others into their homes and communities. They are uprooted when forced to leave and "temporarily" settle in another place. Therefore, the settlement place must make space for them by letting their own space shrink, whether in terms of private space in welcoming the displaced in their homes or any property, or public space in giving them jobs and livelihood opportunities. Consequently, an uprooting of the host communities is necessary as well. Since welcoming IDPs requires making space, it can be assumed that the uprooted IDPs unknowingly uproot host communities. Therefore, a careful examination of the experiences of the IDPs revealed that the ongoing war is uprooting the whole nation of Ukraine since those who were able to stay in the safe regions needed to share their spaces with those fleeing the dangers and threats. Though they did not leave their homes, they had to make space for the displaced. As a result of their uprootedness and being displaced, they are also homebound, though in a different manner compared to the IDPs.

That is why, because of the encounter of the otherness between the Ukrainian IDPs and those welcoming them, both sides have also perceived how different and yet similar they are. Displacement caused by war is atrocious, and yet it also brings recompense: it simultaneously reveals Ukraine's culturally and linguistically diverse regions and yet hopes and desires for the same independence from Russia. And as a nation, it experienced what Moltmann describes when he speaks about the crisis.

> When the whole existing situation is in a state of crisis, it becomes obvious that the future can no longer arise automatically out of the past, that it can no longer be the natural repetition and continuation of the past, but that something new must be found in it.[33]

With all it endured as a nation, Ukraine must take on a new beginning, not completely unfamiliar, so that Ukraine would be unrecognizable. Instead, the new beginning, which lies in the hands of the people of Ukraine, "must arise from the dream of the future"[34] —meaning a free and safe place that fosters belongingness and security within its territories that will help the Ukrainian people grow roots again.

Waiting to be Rooted and Home Again

Based on their expressed hopes, it is certain that waiting is necessary. Then, as waiting becomes part of their hope for freedom, it becomes part of their history. As Ukrainian history depicts how its people fought for centuries and finally gained their unstable independence in 1991, it presently shows that contemporary Ukraine will not yield easily to invaders who want to invalidate that independence. And since by its history, Ukraine has shown how capable it is to fight for its sovereignty, its citizens, IDPs, and local hosts alike, one can count on its ability to ward off its enemy. Accordingly, a history marked with hope in the fulfillment of the promise is, according to Moltmann, exactly where God unendingly reveals Himself faithfully through his promises and their fulfillment.[35]

The hopes mentioned above reflect a non-egotistic attitude from the one hoping. The object for which hope is directed is

33. Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology,* 1st Fortress Press ed. (Fortress Press, 1993), 233.

34. Moltmann, *Hope,* 233.

35 Moltmann, *Hope,* 108.

not oneself but another. The hope coming from the difficult situations of the respondents shows that they seek to see beyond the current hardships and sufferings. Thus, in hoping for the promises to be fulfilled, hope is not only unceasingly looking forward, but also, for those ravaged by war, is not self-centered. So, from the personal experiences of the Ukrainian IDPs, hope entails unselfish waiting and looking forward. But as they hope, they also go about their daily life fueled by that same hope. As Respondent 8 said, "It is my duty to continue to live consciously, not to fall into depression, to do my best and achieve something in life, to return to Ukraine and make it better. For the sake of all those who gave their lives for this."

These experiences show that the present condition of Respondent 8 was transformed by what was hoped for. Thus, the unselfish hope is a hope that points to a superior being capable of changing the current mindsets of Respondent 8. Accordingly, this is where Moltmann's assertion that transformation of the present is brought about by hope that comes from the Christian God.[36] Also, The element of otherness that encounters us in the hope of the Old and New Testaments — the thing we cannot already think out and picture for ourselves based on the given world and of the experiences we already have of that world — confronts us with a promise of something new and with the hope of a future given by God.[37] Thus, the hopes of the displaced Ukrainians above are certainly Christian.

The hope for the fulfillment of the promise of freedom mentioned above is not only related to an unselfish future but also to *homing*, or homeward bound. Thus, the displaced are always homing and, because of the hope of returning home,

36. Moltmann, *Hope,* 33-34.

37. Moltmann, *Hope,* 16.

they endure their present suffering. This transformation is what makes their hope "Christian" despite their religious belief and belonging.

Hoping and Homing Towards the Kingdom of God

Even non-Christian and atheist hopes can be accepted as possessors of a christic hope. As such, statements expressing hope like "living in a free country so that a child can live in a democratic state" and "the only hope is for the Armed Forces of Ukraine, for the victory"[38] are recognized as bearing christic characteristics in Moltmann's theology of hope. Because hope is grounded in history, non-explicit christic experiences can be compared to Christian experiences. So, the non-denominational experiences of hope recounted by the Ukrainian IDPs can be likened to the experiences of the early Christians who were living their earthly life when they were citizens of heaven.[39] As the Ukrainian IDPs were homebound and waiting for the fulfillment of the promised freedom from invaders, Christians are likewise homebound for the promised kingdom of God.

According to Scriptures, the first Christians were practically all religious Jews, waiting for the Messiah to come. And in coming across Jesus of Nazareth, they were able to recognize the signs pointing to him as the promised Messiah.[40] As a result, they began to believe in Him and His teachings, which were not always agreed upon by the Jewish authorities. This triggered a crisis within the Jewish community they belong. More importantly, this crisis reached its climax when Jesus, the promised Messiah, died on the cross and rose again from the dead, according to the Scriptures. Thus, the faith of the

38. Respondent 1 and 2, respectively.

39. Hierapolitanus, *The Didache,* ed. James Aloysius Kleist, S.J.

40. Giorgio Jossa, *Il Cristianesimo Antico Dalle Origini al Concilio Di Nicea,* Quality Paperbacks (Rome: Carocci, 2006), 32-33.

early Christians in Jesus Christ led them into a state of religious and spiritual uprootedness from their religious community and beliefs. This uprootedness brought about persecution and tragic events in the lives of the first Christians. Their faith in the promise of Jesus Christ caused their separation from the Jewish traditions, which caused suffering, but the same faith made them look to the future, to the coming again of the Son of God.[41] It was in their uprootedness that their faith in the promise of the kingdom of God uttered by Jesus Christ became salient, since it was a promise of salvation. But this freedom was different from what the first Christians believed it to be in the beginning. They were waiting for a Messiah who would free them from bondage from a foreign authority in their lands. But what Jesus Christ offered them was freedom from the slavery of sin and through Him have everlasting life (John 3:15). In the uprootedness of the Christians, they continue to journey in this world, hoping to be finally rooted and at home in God's kingdom.[42] Christians believe that they belong to this kingdom. This belongingness to the kingdom remains a mystery of faith, but it does not mean it is incomprehensible. And it can be explained through the experiences of uprootedness and homing of the Ukrainian IDPs.

Based on the narratives, belonging somewhere is being with others. These stories tell that they were able to recognize a feeling that they belonged because they felt welcomed, even though the sentiment of being foreigners still lingered. They felt they belonged, and so they felt at home, and vice versa. They perceived a subtle sense of belonging because of the hope of returning home.

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41. Mark 13:26-27 and Matthew 26:64.

42. Dale T. Irvin, "Theology, Migration, and the Homecoming," in *Theology of Migration in the Abrahamic Religions,* ed. E. Padilla and P. Phan, Christianities of the World (Palgrave Macmillan US, 2014), 18.

Belonging to the Kingdom of God in Diversity

The journey of hope toward God's kingdom transpires in history, belonging implies taking part in "the completion of history and creation, its perfecting into the kingdom of glory in which God himself 'indwells' his creation."[43] This applies to Ukraine's story of journeying to a promised free and independent nation because it mimics the journey of Christians toward the promised kingdom of God. The respondents will only feel sure at home when Ukraine wins the war and keeps its sovereignty, because that is also when they can geographically regain their homes. Respondents 6 and 11 have explicitly named Russia the enemy and resolutely decided to avoid it. This is subtly saying that they do not want to be under the Russians because that is not where they truly belong. In other words, they desire to be where they feel at home. Just like how Christians will only truly feel at home once the lordship of God over His kingdom is found both in heaven and on earth.[44] However, in the irruption of Jesus Christ in the history of humankind, God has fulfilled His promise of the Messiah—that in His death and resurrection, God showed Himself faithful to His promise and offered salvation to all, without exception. As Moltmann said,

> God's promises must be understood historically, not merely because they were uttered in history, and must ever and again be interpreted afresh in history, but also because they throw open a particular history. [...] The opening up of history in the possibilities of the promising God means the opening up of the history of the creative God for whom creation out of nothing and new creation from the dead is possible. Faith in the promise does not just count on the objective and subjective possibilities

43. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* (Fortress Press, 2004), 280.

44. Moltmann, *Hope*, 100.

> of history; it reckons with the presence of the one who makes the impossible.[45]

Thus, belonging to the kingdom of God is the journey of hope towards the reconciliation of differences, which is possible only to the Creator alone. This hope is Christian because it is centered on Jesus Christ as the sole Savior, the only One capable of uniting believers of all races and denominations in Him. Through God's event in history, the animosity the Ukrainian IDPs have toward the Russians will one day cease to exist. The criterion of a divine promise is that it creates a new beginning. This calls for faith in the promise because the One who uttered it will always be true to His word. Christian hope then goes along with faith and is focused on another, who is "the object hoped for and also the hope inspired by it."[46]

Interculturality and Ecumenism

The difference in cultures among Ukrainians evokes interculturality and shows that one is not alone in their journey. Second, their hope for freedom established the importance of otherness in the transformative power of hope that is innately Christian, and that this hope is future-oriented. In other words, the hopes of the Ukrainian IDPs regarded through the lens of Moltmann's theology of hope have revealed an ecumenical dimension as well.

The personal narratives of the respondents made intercultural encounters perceivable. Even though their stories are unfortunate, they exhibit enriching capacities because others in them are willing to help and are animated by the same hope of freedom from the invaders. In this sense, interculturality among Ukrainians at war leads to a rediscovery

45. Jürgen Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology: Ways and Forms of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2000), 99.

46. Moltmann, *Hope*, 16.

of their identity as a nation, belonging to the same people, despite cultural, linguistic, and ethnic differences. Hoping for the same goal is mobilizing Ukrainians into being one people. Like how Christians of all denominations are being moved by the same Spirit into being one with the Father as Jesus prayed for: "That they may all be one" (John 17:21).

How was it possible that victims of war were able to lead a theological study based on Christian hope to ecumenism as a promotion of cooperation and unity among Christians? The Church, and not just individual Christians, in their journey back to the Father, shall progressively take the only path leading to the Father. Thus, this "constricting" movement towards the unique path is considered an ecumenical movement. In ecumenism, there needs to be a compromise to avoid breaking the existing tension created by differences and, in the case of this study, by the war. In the stories of the Ukrainian IDPs, efforts of integration and welcoming are perceived. This recognition plays a significant role in unifying the Ukrainian people because they have the same goal: making it through and winning the war. Consequently, their presents conform to the future hoped for, just as Moltmann defined what Christian hope is. In this case, Christian hope is not only for the victory of Ukraine but also for the unity of the Ukrainian people. Thus, as a metaphor for the Christian life, this paper posits that the same stories implicitly describe the hope for Christian unity as an aspiration that seeks the fulfillment of the Saviour's prayer "that they may all be one" (John 17:21), it also implies zeal and constant effort on the part of all Christians, but also the hope that the work will be accomplished at a point in time known only to God.[47]

47. Cristian-Sebastian Sonea, "Ecumenism as Hope: The Prophetic Role and the Eschatological Function of the Church: Religions," *Religions* 14, no. 10 (October 2023): 1.

The personal experiences of the respondents have opened the doors towards an awareness that they bear the capacity to (1) provide examples that will lead to a better understanding of what ecumenism is, and (2) mobilize the nation to work for unity.

Since working for unity does not disregard the real conflicts between the churches in Ukraine, unity between them should remain a challenge and a motivation for ecumenical encounters and dialogues. Therefore, even though the Euromaidan crisis of 2014 was not recognized or organized as an ecumenical protest, through this study, it can be considered as one because Christians of diverse denominations gathered there to send and communicate the same message regarding Ukraine's politics.[48] The protests during the Euromaidan crisis have shown an example of how an ecumenical movement can be concretized and formalized in this world. At the same time, it is worth underlining that although Moltmann does not explicitly treat ecumenism in his theology of hope, this can implicitly lead to open discussions about ecumenism.

As the journey of each Ukrainian IDP moves forward, it unveils lessons and messages of hope because the experiences involved in this journey are marked and motivated by the Christian hope that transforms the present according to what it hopes for. What is hoped for—independence of and an end to war in Ukraine and the kingdom of God—emphasized the need to be rooted and to belong. As a result, this need to belong and be rooted at home led to the intercultural and ecumenical aspects of the Christian life as observed in the personal narratives of this research. These two criteria—interculturality and ecumenism—naturally point toward migration theology.

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48. For more details, see Nadia Diuk, "EUROMAIDAN: Ukraine's Self-Organizing Revolution," *World Affairs* 176, no. 6 (2014): 9–16.

Contribution to Migration Theology

The interculturality drawn from the narratives of individuals and from their country's history reflects that Ukrainian history and the Ukrainian participants of this study's personal stories raised awareness as to how to better understand the cultural context of the eighteen victims of war. Intercultural study is important in a theology of migration because migrants bring with them (often without being conscious of doing so) their culture, language, and beliefs to where they settle, temporarily or permanently. Being displaced within their country's borders highlighted their differences from the locals of the host communities they are in. This created a crisis that led most of them to reassess how they see and define themselves. The same goes with the locals who welcomed them. The intercultural aspect of their displacement appeals to a theology that not only focuses on migration as a spatial movement but also one that pays attention to the human, social, and spiritual dimensions of the migrants in movement. Moreover, the interpretation of personal narratives of the displaced in Ukraine exposed the urgent need for a holistic and interdisciplinary approach to doing a theology of migration to provide a better appreciation of the implicit and explicit Christian messages the displaced offer the Church and the world. As they are affirmed to be bearers of Christian messages, they can be considered as those who are also paving the way for an ecumenical encounter and dialogue that opens doors for the unity of Christians.

Moreover, in using personal narratives of the Ukrainian IDPs still displaced since the war is still ravaging their country, this paper has demonstrated that human stories can produce unusual and yet fertile outcomes. Through the experience of the Ukrainian people in the context of war, combined with the mimetic theory of Paul Ricoeur and Jürgen Moltmann's theology

of hope, individual migrant stories can speak of God because they have divine grace in them. Harvesting their theological implications is thus a matter of employing the best method of theologically studying them. While one should be careful in doing a theology of migration using the personal narratives of migrants, the process of doing so is quite enriching.

Moltmann gave history a new perspective by putting the death and resurrection of Jesus at its foundation and, therefore, calling for a constant "hermeneutical" approach to occurring events in the temporal world. In Moltmann's theology, the displacement of Ukrainians during the war is an event that merits attention because Christian hope is undoubtedly there. Even though the Ukrainian IDPs are still in displacement, they can implicitly or explicitly testify to living a Christ-like life. Through them, hope was perceived as it operates as encouragement for the present, in bearing the afflictions of displacement, and as a promise that opens their tormented present to a future unlike the present. What transpires is not without relevance to the promise that hope is aspiring for.

As a result, being homeward bound alongside others towards a possible future that transforms the quality of the present is characteristic of Christian hoping. So, whether hope is explicitly described as Christian or is denied, that hope can point towards God and, therefore, give a renewed knowledge of Him. Moltmann writes,

> Knowledge of God is then an anticipatory knowledge of the future of God, a knowledge of the faithfulness of God which is upheld by the hopes that are called to life by his promises. Knowledge of God is then a knowledge that draws us onwards, not upwards, into situations that are not yet finalized but still outstanding.[49]

49. Moltmann, *Hope*, 118.

Conclusion

The respondents to the online questionnaire of this study have made it clear that they are also engaged in this war, believing in the eventual victory of Ukraine and the establishment of peace in their lands. Their narratives, viewed using Paul Ricoeur's mimetic theory, serve as testimonies of hope that Jürgen Moltmann's theology would categorize as Christian.

Their stories produced insightful and positive connotations on their displacements, thanks to a careful consideration of their context, without which interpreting the narratives would have been superficial. Also, the displacement experiences of each respondent have been proven to undergo a spiritual journey, which can be described as terrible and yet fruitful. This is so because their horrendous experiences were expressed almost always with expressions of hope and the importance of others. The central message pulled out from their stories was that of hope for a better-than-present future.

This is why the personal experiences of the respondents are viewed as metaphors for Christian life on earth. Their displacement stories are seen as stories of uprootedness and the need to belong, which in turn, lead to the desire and yearning to return home and establish connections with others who make them feel welcomed. Moltmann's theology of hope recognizes these narratives as mirroring the experiences of Christians, as citizens of the kingdom of God, as they navigate their worldly lives.

The theological interpretations and reflections on the narratives channeled the path toward intercultural and ecumenical dimensions lying beneath the already palpable and significant messages of the narratives: that narratives brought about by crises such as displacement caused by war can authentically relay theological understanding of the

direct connection between theology (particularly migration theology), interculturality, and ecumenism. In return, these aspects can be attributed and considered as contributions to Moltmann's theology of hope.

By using a proper methodology and approach in analyzing and interpreting personal narratives, the stories communicated, through their testimonies of hope of peace and victory amidst suffering and pain, what Christians would define as faith and hope in the promised salvation through Jesus Christ's death and resurrection to all who believe in Him and the One and only faithful God of promises.

These findings clearly express the significance of highlighting hope as a beacon that sheds light on the present but points to the horizon. Because of this, this study also affirms that any experience that testifies to a hope that nurtures the faith in a better world to come is indeed Christian because only the Christian God died and rose from the dead, in Jesus Christ.

Nevertheless, a study like this naturally calls for further research. I recognize that this study has only paved the way for further research, especially regarding the interconnection of interculturality, ecumenism, and migration theology on a larger scale and different migrant groups. In so doing, this study recommends further studies and research that will demonstrate how being a migrant or being in displacement can be a new form of being a missionary in a globalized world through the combined efforts of theology and intersectionality.

Therefore, this study of the narratives of the eighteen respondents was able to show how, in their suffering, these Ukrainian IDPs could express hope, which is innately Christian according to Moltmann's theology. This, I hope, will motivate the Church to pay a different outlook on IDPs as human beings in need of help but are also contributors not only

to the well-being of the welcoming society but to both local and universal ecclesial lives that are simultaneously moving toward the fulfillment of Jesus Christ's promise of the coming kingdom.

ENVIRONMENTAL COSTS OF THE WEST PHILIPPINE SEA DISPUTE IN LIGHT OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

Teofilo Giovan S. Pugeda III

This paper is an analytical reflection on the insights Catholic Social Teaching (CST) has to offer on the West Philippine Sea Dispute.[1] At the interface of the competing claims is 'sister water,' which uses the words of Saint Francis of Assisi. More than a source of resources for human development, the disputed maritime region, as a biodiverse ecosystem, constitutes an inherently created good as per Genesis 1:20-21.[2] Arguably, some of the actions in the dispute towards claiming sovereignty overlook the concepts of stewardship and community of creation, which permeate CST regarding the environment. By upholding stewardship and community, CST highlights the co-responsibility of all in going beyond their exclusive interests and striving towards the common good of all. By drawing from CST, while still maintaining the principle of the Separation of Church and State, the Philippines would have better legal and moral grounds for asserting its claims by tying them to the pressing interests of the environment.

1. One can replace "Catholic" with "Christian" for greater inclusivity and "Teaching" with "Tradition" for a broader scope.

2. Then God said: Let the water teem with an abundance of living creatures, and on the earth let birds fly beneath the dome of the sky. God created the great sea monsters and all kinds of crawling living creatures with which the water teems, and all kinds of winged birds. God saw that it was good (All verses are from NABRE).

This paper discusses (1) an overview of the maritime dispute, mainly from the Philippine perspective, (2) the disputed legal status of the West Philippine Sea in local and international law, (3) the state of coral reefs in the South China Sea, particularly in the West Philippine Sea, (4) CST on the environment, especially concerning the West Philippine Sea, and (5) some practical and conceptual avenues to enrich the conversation. So far, there is not enough academic literature on the environmental costs of the West Philippine Sea Dispute, notably in light of CST. This paper intends to address these concerns.

Research Parameters

The West Philippine Sea Dispute is a multifaceted issue ranging from historical, political, and environmental, the last of which is the main interest of this paper. The actors also range from proximate to distant. The proximate actors are the Philippines, China, Vietnam, Brunei, Malaysia, and Taiwan. Meanwhile, the distant ones include the United States, Japan, and Australia. For this paper, the primary actor discussed is the Philippines.[3] The dispute involves different subregions comprising islands, atolls, shoals, and reefs: Pratas Islands in the northeast, the Paracel Islands in the west, the Macclesfield Bank and Scarborough Shoal in the east and southeast, and the Spratly Islands in the south. Each subregion is the object of dispute by two or more proximate actors. China asserts sovereignty over all of them, while the other actors over particular ones. Hence, the maritime dispute is a set of several competing claims. This paper focuses on the West Philippine Sea. As such, it is not a political critique or endorsement of any actors in the maritime dispute, an analysis of the dispute in all aspects, or

3. When speaking of countries, I refer primarily to their political structure. I recognize the plurality of socio-political views in their populace, which should disincline one from simplistic thinking that may foster prejudice.

a policy paper for political action. Instead, it is a CST-informed analysis and reflection on the West Philippine Sea Dispute vis-à-vis the environment.

An Overview of the Maritime Dispute

The South China Sea is a geopolitical region with several trade routes of about 3,500,000 square kilometers. There are over 250 small islands, atolls, cays, shoals, reefs, and sandbars, most of which have no inhabitants, and many are either submerged at high tide or permanently submerged. The South China Sea is also one of the most biodiverse ecosystems in the world, with around 600 species of coral, 3,000 species of fish, and 1,500 species of sponge, some of which are already endangered species.[4] The region has over a hundred reef features in 37,200 square kilometers, which serve as breeding grounds and habitats for numerous fish species.[5] The reef features are in nine locations.[6] The part of the South China Sea that is within the exclusive economic zone of the Philippines is the West Philippine Sea (WPS). The WPS runs along the west coast of

4. Chloe Houdre, "Environmental Ramifications of the South China Sea Conflict: Vying for Regional Dominance at the Environment's Expense," *Georgetown Law*, July 12, 2018, accessed August 16, 2024, https://www.law.georgetown.edu/environmental-law-review/blog/environmental-ramifications-of-the-south-china-sea-conflict-vying-for-regional-dominance-at-the-environments-expense/.

5. Remedios Lucio, "Scientists warn of ecological damage in West Philippine Sea due to China's militarization," *Maritime Fairtrade*, June 19, 2024, accessed August 22, 2024, https://maritimefairtrade.org/scientists-warn-of-ecological-damage-in-west-philippine-sea-due-to-chinas-militarization/.

6. According to data from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, 27 are already occupied by China, 18 by Vietnam, 9 by the Philippines, 5 by Malaysia and 1 by Taiwan. See: Kurt Dela Peña, "'Irreparable Harm': China's Intrusion Impact on West Philippine Sea Ecosystem," *Inquirer*, March 10, 2024, accessed August 22, 2024, https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1915430/irreparable-harm-china-intrusions-impact-on-west-philippine-sea-ecosystem.

Luzon, Mindoro, and Palawan and stretches 200 nautical miles from the shorelines towards the Scarborough Shoal (locally known as Bajo de Masinloc) and the northeastern section of the Spratly Islands (Kalayaan group of islands).[7]

The Philippines asserts itself in the maritime dispute because the WPS contributes much to the total fish production of the country, which was around 10.8% from 2018 to 2022.[8] Over 600,000 Filipino fisherfolk from the Ilocos, Central Luzon, Mindoro, Marinduque, Romblon, Palawan, and some parts of the National Capital Region rely on the safe use of the WPS to sustain their livelihoods.[9] If we also account for their close families and associates, the number reaches about 1.8 million Filipinos having an immediate vested interest in the WPS. This number does not even consider the many more throughout the country who benefit economically from their activities. About 70 to 80% of mackerel in Metro Manila comes from the WPS.[10] However, Chinese vessels have disturbed many of the Filipino fisherfolk. In addition, Chinese activities have damaged thousands of acres of coral reefs in the WPS due to island-building and giant clam harvesting.[11] Giant clam shells have a translucent white color that resembles that of elephant ivory, making

7. It is sometimes the case that the people equate the South China Sea with the West Philippine Sea. The problem of terminology treads more in the political realm, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

8. Vanessa Mae Escaño, "Unlocking the diverse bounty of the West Philippine Sea," *National Fisheries and Research Institute*, accessed August 22, 2024, https://nfrdi.da.gov.ph/2024/05/20/feature-unlocking-the-diverse-bounty-of-the-west-philippine-sea/#:~:text=The%20rich%20coral%20reef%20ecosystems,that%20the%20country%20benefits%20from.

9. Escaño, "Unlocking the diverse bounty of the West Philippine Sea."

10. Escaño, "Unlocking the diverse bounty of the West Philippine Sea."

11. Lucio, "Scientists warn of ecological damage in West Philippine Sea due to China's militarization."

them good substitutes for crafting jewelry and statues. As a result, the coral reefs have shrunk by 16% from 2014 to 2024.[12] From an economic standpoint, this is equivalent to an annual loss of PHP 33.1 billion.[13] To better understand the situation, a brief course through history is helpful.

As early as 1947, the Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Carlos Garcia, asserted claims over the Spratly Islands as a security guarantee from Japan.[14] The Japanese had used them during the Second World War as aircraft launchpads but renounced them in 1951 without designating subsequent ownership. In 1978, the Philippine government included the Spratly Islands with the Palawan province through Presidential Decree No. 1596.[15] Over the next decade, gradual downward tension in the Cambodia-Vietnam war, a source for cooperation between China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), had allowed the former to redirect its attention towards other regional interests. China insists on sovereignty over the maritime region, per a ten-dash line (previously a nine-dash line), which covers 85.7% of the South China Sea (3 million square kilometers) and overlaps with 80% of the Philippine Exclusive Economic Zone (381,000 square kilometers).[16] Concurrently, economic growth among Asian countries led to an increasing demand for resources and corresponding

12. Lucio, "Scientists warn of ecological damage in West Philippine Sea due to China's militarization."

13. Lucio, "Scientists warn of ecological damage in West Philippine Sea due to China's militarization."

14. Francisco A. Magno, "Environmental Security in the South China Sea*," *Security Dialogue* 28, no. 1 (March 1997): 97-112. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0967010697028001009?icid=int.sj-abstract.similar-articles.9.

15. Magno, "Environmental Security in the South China Sea*."

16. Maximo Paulino T Sison III, "Universalizing the Law of the Sea in the South China Sea Dispute," *Ocean Development & International Law* 49, no. 2 (2018): 158.

assertions of sovereignty. In 1988, China and Vietnam briefly clashed over the Johnson South Reef in the Spratly Islands, with the former prevailing.[17] In 1991, foreign affairs officials and academics from ASEAN, China, Taiwan, and Laos proposed that claimants explore areas of cooperation such as information exchange and joint development.[18] In the succeeding year, foreign affairs officials met in Manila, where they issued the ASEAN Declaration on the South China Sea, which insisted on peaceful means to resolve differing claims in the region. In 1995, China sent armed vessels and constructed military structures in Mischief or Panganiban Reef.[19] In the same year, Chinese fishing vessels were apprehended and found to contain sea turtles. Meanwhile, the Philippine Department of Environmental and Natural Resources suggested to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization or UNESCO that the Spratly Islands be an internationally protected seascape system.[20] In 1999, the Philippines ran aground the BRP Sierra Madre on the Second Thomas Shoal (Ayungin) to serve as an outpost.

Maritime tensions between the Philippines and China in 2012 led to a standoff in the Scarborough Shoal, where Philippine authorities apprehended Chinese fishermen possessing corals, sea turtles, and giant clams. Although the Philippines withdrew from the area under the assumption of mutual agreement, China erected a barrier in the shoal. At the same time, China undertook reclamation in the WPS to develop military facilities there. In light of the standoff and

17. Chao Pao-Min, "A New Scramble for the South China Sea Islands," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 12, no. 1 (June 1990): 20-39, https://www.jstor.org/stable/42707646.

18. Magno, "Environmental Security in the South China Sea*."

19. Magno, "Environmental Security in the South China Sea*."

20. Magno, "Environmental Security in the South China Sea*."

reclamation that has destroyed large swathes of coral reef systems found in the following reefs: Johnson, McKeenan, Mischief, Cuarteron, Gaven, and Fiery Cross, the Philippines filed an arbitration case on January 22, 2013, against China, before the Permanent Court of Arbitration under Annex VII (Arbitration) of the United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Seas (UNCLOS).[21] The Philippines raised the following general issues:

1. The Validity of the Historic Rights Claim of China
2. Geologic Features in the Spratly Islands
3. China-Occupied Geologic Features in the Spratly Islands
4. Scarborough Shoal
5. Harm to the Marine Environment

Since the arbitration filing, some claimants have intensified the building of artificial islands to bolster their claims of sovereignty in the South China Sea. The issue became so critical that the Philippine ambassador to the United Nations, Lourdes O. Yparraguirre, remarked in 2015: "The South China Sea is already in an environmental crisis."[22] On July 12, 2016, the Philippines won the arbitration case *Philippines v. China*, which declared the nine-dash line of China as invalid and its fishing and island-building activities, with military airstrips, as seriously damaging to the ecosystem. Unfortunately,

21. Permanent Mission of the Republic of the Philippines to the United Nations, "Philippines Raises Concern on Environmental Crisis in South China Sea, Calls for Regional and Global Cooperation," *Permanent Mission of the Republic of the Philippines to the United Nations*, June 10, 2015, accessed August 22, 2024, https://www.un.int/philippines/activities/philippines-raises-concern-environmental-crisis-south-china-sea-calls-regional-and-global.

22. Permanent Mission of the Republic of the Philippines to the United Nations, "Philippines Raises Concern on Environmental Crisis in South China Sea, Calls for Regional and Global Cooperation."

China did not recognize the arbitration ruling and continued to conduct ecologically damaging activities in the region with increased hostilities through the use of water cannons. Around 220 militia vessels also encroached on the Julian Felipe Reef and others around the Rozu Reef and Escoda Shoal.[23] The Armed Forces of the Philippines also spotted illegal structures at Union (*Pagkakaisa*) Banks in the Kalayaan group of islands.[24] The problem is heightened given the natural resources vied for by the proximate actors. The South China Sea has 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and 11 billion oil reserves.[25] The WPS has an estimated 12,158 billion cubic feet of natural gas reserves and 6,203 million oil reserves.[26] Much of the former is in the Malampaya gas field, partly in the disputed area. In 2023, Senator Risa Hontiveros reiterated the call for environmental reparations from China, which she estimated in 2021

23. Bella Perez-Rubio, "Damage caused by China in West Philippine Sea could affect food security," Philippine Star, April 2, 2021, accessed August 22, 2024, https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2021/04/02/2088602/damage-caused-china-west-philippine-sea-could-affect-food-security-scientists?via=webuproar.

24. Anna Felicia-Bajo, "AFP: 'Illegal' Chinese structures spotted at Pagkakaisa Banks," GMA News, April 2, 2021, accessed August 22, 2024, https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/782104/afp-illegal-man-made-structures-spotted-at-pagkakaisa-banks/story/.

25. Kurt Dela Peña, "China invasion of West Philippine Sea: Root of all evil is access to oil, gas," Inquirer, May 15, 2024, accessed August 25, 2024, https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1940774/china-invasion-of-wps-root-of-all-evil-is-access-to-oil-gas.

26. Dela Peña, "China invasion of West Philippine Sea: Root of all evil is access to oil, gas."

to be over PHP 800 billion.[27] The same year, the Philippine Department of Justice (DOJ) filed an environmental complaint before an international body.[28] Meanwhile, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources released a statement deploring environmental damage on the WPS.[29] In May 2024, the DOJ and the Office of the Solicitor-General were finalizing the environmental complaint.[30] A few months later, the collision of Philippine and Chinese vessels in Sabina Shoal hit the news.[31] The next section further elaborates on the competing legal claims of the Philippines and China in the WPS.

27. Senate of the Philippines, "Hontiveros renews call for China to pay billions in environmental damages in the WPS," Senate of the Philippines, September 20, 2023, https://legacy.senate.gov.ph/press_release/2023/0920_hontiveros1.asp (accessed August 22, 2024); Senate of the Philippines, "Hontiveros: China's debt to PH now over P800 billion, Beijing should start paying up," Senate of the Philippines, February 18, 2021, accessed August 22, 2024, https://legacy.senate.gov.ph/press_release/2021/0218_hontiveros1.asp.

28. Giselle Ombay, "Hontiveros wants China to pay environmental damages for West PH Sea corals," *GMA News*, September 20, 2023, accessed August 20, 2024, https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/882685/hontiveros-wants-china-to-pay-environmental-damages-for-west-ph-sea-corals/story/.

29. Department of Environment and Natural Resources, "DENR Statement on West Philippine Sea," Department of Environment and Natural Resources, September 23, 2023, accessed September 1, 2024, https://denr.gov.ph/news-events/denr-statement-on-west-philippine-sea/.

30. Filane Mikee Cervantes, "PH to complete environmental case vs. China in 'few weeks'- DOJ," *Philippine News Agency*, May 30, 2024, accessed August 22, 2024, https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/12259https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/122593535.

31. Bea Cupin, "Philippines says China damaged PCG ships near Escoda Shoal," *Rappler*, August 19, 2024, accessed August 22, 2024, https://www.rappler.com/philippines/statement-ships-collision-escoda-shoal-august-19-2024/.

Disputed Legal Status of the West Philippine Sea

Philippines

The Philippine assertion in the WPS Dispute has been well-presented by Antonio T. Carpio, then-Associate Justice of the Supreme Court.[32] The dispute between the Philippines and China involves 80% of the Philippine Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the WPS. China claims it is within its ten-dash demarcation per its alleged historical rights. The Philippines claims it is in line with international law, giving a state exclusive economic rights over waters within 200 miles of its baselines. The concept of an EEZ dates back to the Truman Proclamation of the United States on September 28, 1945, claiming waters over its continental shelves. The first true EEZ came from the declarations of Chile and Peru on June 23 and August 1, 1947, respectively, establishing maritime zones extending 200 nautical miles off their coasts. The Philippine EEZ was established in local law by President Ferdinand Marcos, Sr. on June 11, 1978, through Presidential Decree 1599, stating:

> **Section 1.** There is hereby established a zone to be known as the exclusive economic zone of the Philippines. The exclusive economic zone shall extend to a distance of two hundred nautical miles beyond and from the baselines from which the territorial sea is measured: Provided, That, where the outer limits of the zone as thus determined overlap the exclusive economic zone of an adjacent or neighboring state, the common boundaries shall be determined by agreement with the state concerned or in accordance with pertinent generally recognized principles of international law on delimitation.

32. Antonio T. Carpio, "The South China Sea Dispute: Philippine Sovereign Rights and Jurisdiction in the West Philippine Sea," *Philippine Law Journal* 90, no. 3 (March 2017): 459-555.

> **Section 2.** Without prejudice to the rights of the Republic of the Philippines over it territorial sea and continental shelf, it shall have and exercise in the exclusive economic zone established herein the following;
>
> (a) Sovereignty rights for the purpose of exploration and exploitation, conservation and management of the natural resources, whether living or non-living, both renewable and non-renewable, of the sea-bed, including the subsoil and the superjacent waters, and with regard to other activities for the economic exploitation and exploration of the resources of the zone, such as the production of energy from the water, currents, and winds;
>
> (b) Exclusive rights and jurisdiction with respect to the establishment and utilization of artificial islands, off-shore terminals, installations and structures, the preservation of the marine environment, including the prevention and control of pollution, and scientific research;
>
> (c) Such other rights as are recognized by international law or state practice.[33]

Confident in the Philippine assertion, President Benigno Aquino III named the waters west of the Philippines as the West Philippine Sea in 2012 through Administrative Order 29, stating:

> **Section 1.** The maritime areas on the western side of the Philippine archipelago are hereby named as the West Philippine Sea. These areas include the Luzon Sea as well as the waters around, within and adjacent to the Kalayaan Island Group and Bajo De Masinloc, also known as Scarborough Shoal.

33. Office of the President, *Establishing an Exclusive Economic Zone and for Other Purposes* by Ferdinand Marcos, Sr., Presidential Decree 1599, Manila: 1978. accessed September 1, 2024, https://lawphil.net/statutes/presdecs/pd1978/pd_1599_1978.html.

> **Section 2.** The naming of the West Philippine Sea is without prejudice to the determination of the maritime domain over territories in which the Republic of the Philippines has sovereignty and jurisdiction.[34]

In November 2024, President Ferdinand Marcos, Jr., signed two laws: The Philippine Maritime Zones Act (Republic Act 12064) and the Philippine Archipelagic Sea Lanes Act (Republic Act 12065).[35] Republic Act 12064 "defines the extent of the country's maritime entitlements and fully declares their metes and bounds following the Philippine Constitution and the United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Sea."[36] In other words, the law aligns more with the maritime zones, according to the UNCLOS. Meanwhile, Republic Act 12065 "establishes three archipelagic sea lanes that shall be utilized and accessed by foreign ships and aircraft, without compromising the country's national security."[37] This aligns more with the archipelagic sea lanes, according to the UNCLOS. In response, China opposed both laws.

China

The interest of China in much of the South China Sea, including the WPS, is evident in its abundant fish catch in the maritime region to sustain its population of over a billion.

34. Office of the President, Naming the West Philippine Sea of the Republic of the Philippines, and for Other Purposes by Benigno Aquino III, Administrative Order 29, Manila: 2012, accessed September 1, 2024, https://lawphil.net/executive/ao/ao2012/ao_29_2012.html.

35. Pia Gutierrez, "Marcos Signs Two Laws Reinforcing Philippine Rights over Maritime Zones," *ABS-CBN News*, November 8, 2024, https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/2024/11/8/marcos-signs-two-laws-reinforcing-philippine-rights-over-maritime-zones-1306.

36. Gutierrez, "Marcos Signs Two Laws Reinforcing Philippine Rights over Maritime Zones."

37. Gutierrez, "Marcos Signs Two Laws Reinforcing Philippine Rights over Maritime Zones."

Furthermore, as the largest global net importer of petroleum, it also has much to gain from the oil reserves in the South China Sea. China asserts over much of the South China Sea on its belief that it was the first to map, record, and patrol the maritime region, as far back as the traditional Xia dynasty (c. 2100-1600 BC).[38] As a visual reference, it uses a ten-dash line to signify its sovereignty over the South China Sea. The Kuomintang government adopted this line of thinking in December 1947, using a map entitled "Location of the South Sea Islands," which had eleven dashes.[39] Three years later, the Communist government removed two dashes in the Gulf of Tonkin.[40] It had first insisted on this nine-dash line in 2009 when it contested the Extended Continental Shelf claim of Vietnam.[41] Yet, it did not give the exact coordinates of each dash. By 2013, China added a tenth dash east of Taiwan.[42] Regarding the Spratly Islands, Chinese Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai contended in 1951 that:

> In fact, the Paracel Archipelago and Spratly Island, as well as the whole Spratly Archipelago...have always been Chinese territory. Though occupied for some time during the war of aggression unleashed by Japanese imperialism, they were taken over by the then Chinese government following Japan's surrender. The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China declares herewith: The inviolable sovereignty of the People's Republic of China over Spratly Island and the

38. Xavier Furtado, "International Law and the Dispute over the Spratly Islands: Wither UNCLOS?" *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 21, no. 3 (December 1999), 388.

39. Carpio, "The South China Sea Dispute: Philippine Sovereign Rights and Jurisdiction in the West Philippine Sea," 467.

40. Carpio, "The South China Sea Dispute: Philippine Sovereign Rights and Jurisdiction in the West Philippine Sea," 468.

41. Carpio, "The South China Sea Dispute: Philippine Sovereign Rights and Jurisdiction in the West Philippine Sea," 468.

42. Carpio, "The South China Sea Dispute: Philippine Sovereign Rights and Jurisdiction in the West Philippine Sea," 470.

> Paracel Archipelago will by no means be impaired, irrespective of whether the American-British draft for a peace treaty with Japan should make any stipulations and of the nature of any such stipulations.[43]

International Law

The primary international law in the WPS Dispute is the UNCLOS. The UNCLOS traces its origins to three United Nations conferences in 1958, 1960, and 1973 that attempted to create uniform regulations for territorial seas.[44] After nine years of deliberations, the third conference ended with the formation of UNCLOS on December 10, 1982. In principle, it sought to establish limits on territorial and contiguous seas, navigation rights, seabed usage, and dispute adjudication. The UNCLOS entered into force on November 16, 1994. By 2024, 170 state parties, including the Philippines and China, had ratified it, though the latter did not accept certain binding provisions. As a text, UNCLOS is composed of the following: a preamble, seventeen parts, and nine annexes. Under the seventeen parts, there are 320 articles, numbered consecutively. While under the nine annexes, there are 106 articles, numbered non-consecutively. Notably, UNCLOS legitimized at the international level the EEZ of states in Part V, comprising Articles 55-75, by stating:

> Article 55
>
> *Specific legal regime of the exclusive economic zone*
>
> The exclusive economic zone is an area beyond and adjacent to the territorial sea, subject to the specific legal regime established in this Part, under which the rights

43. Furtado, "International Law and the Dispute over the Spratly Islands: Wither UNCLOS?" 389-390.

44. Stephen C. Nemeth, Sara McLaughlin Mitchell, Elizabeth A. Nyman, and Paul R. Hensel, "Ruling the Seas: Managing Maritime Conflicts through UNCLOS and Exclusive Economic Zones," *International Interactions* 40: (2014), 713.

and jurisdiction of the coastal State and the rights and freedoms of other States are governed by the relevant provisions of this Convention.

Article 56

Rights, jurisdiction, and duties of the coastal State in the exclusive economic zone

1. In the exclusive economic zone, the coastal State has:

(a) sovereign rights for the purpose of exploring and exploiting, conserving and managing the natural resources, whether living or non-living, of the waters superjacent to the seabed and of the seabed and its subsoil and with regard to other activities for the economic exploitation and exploration of the zone, such as the production of energy from the water, currents, and winds;

(b) jurisdiction as provided for in the relevant provisions of this Convention with regard to:

(i) the establishment and use of artificial islands, installations and structures;

(ii) marine scientific research;

(iii) the protection and preservation of the marine environment;

(c) other rights and duties provided for in this Convention.

2. In exercising its rights and performing its duties under this Convention in the exclusive economic zone, the coastal State shall have due regard to the rights and duties of other States and shall act in a manner compatible with the provisions of this Convention.

3. The rights set out in this article with respect to the seabed and subsoil shall be exercised in accordance with Part VI.

> Article 57
>
> *Breadth of the exclusive economic zones*
>
> The exclusive economic zone shall not extend beyond 200 nautical miles from the baselines from which the breadth of the territorial sea is measured.[45]

Part XII, which deals with protecting and preserving the marine environment, is of the highest interest to this paper. Under it, there are eleven sections containing Articles 192-237. The first two set the tone:

> Article 192
>
> *General Obligation*
>
> States have the obligation to protect and preserve the marine environment.
>
> Article 193
>
> *Sovereign rights of States to exploit their natural resources*
>
> States have the sovereign right to exploit their natural resources pursuant to their environmental policies and in accordance with their duty to protect and preserve the marine environment.[46]

While marine protection and preservation is the topic of Part XII, one can find mechanisms about the environment throughout the document. The UNCLOS can, thus, be said to be an environmental document. As international legislation, it was a leap forward for environmental protection. In terms of implementation, however, the picture is less than ideal. It is important to note that Part XII deals with pollution, a pressing issue but not the only threat to the marine environment. One point where the UNCLOS fails to provide adequate

45. United Nations, *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea,* Montego Bay, Jamaica, 1982. https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf.

46. United Nations, *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*.

mechanisms is addressing coral reef destruction, a prominent issue in the WPS Dispute. Nowhere in the UNCLOS is the word "coral" found, and only six times is the word "reef" mentioned. The subsequent section makes a point on coral reef destruction that only emphasizes the need to update the UNCLOS to address it effectively.

State of Coral Reefs

There are many environmental issues in the WPS Dispute. Since the most pervasive one is coral reef destruction, it is worth delving into more details. First, some information on coral reef development: Corals are invertebrate animals that are part of the animal classification Cnidaria, which includes jellyfish and sea anemones. Corals come in two types: hard and soft. Hard corals "extract calcium carbonate from seawater to create a hard, durable exoskeleton that protects their soft, sac-like bodies."[47] These exoskeletons form reef structures. Thus, coral reefs are the amalgamation of numerous coral exoskeletons. According to Professor Alfredo C. Robles, coral reefs serve as geological structures and living ecosystems, which means they house a community of marine species living together in harmony and mutual benefit.[48] Simone Montano notes that "coral reefs encompass the highest biodiversity of any marine ecosystem of the planet."[49] It is not for naught that they are

47. Rachel Ross, "What Are Coral Reefs?" Live Science, September 25, 2018, accessed on August 27, 2024, https://www.livescience.com/40276-coral-reefs.html#:~:text=Coral%20reefs%20are%20large%20underwater,colonial%20marine%20invertebrates%20called%20coral.

48. Alfredo C. Robles, Jr., *Endangered Species and Fragile Ecosystems in the South China Sea: The Philippine v. China Arbitration* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.), 60.

49. Simone Montano, "The Extraordinary Importance of Coral-Associated Fauna," *Diversity* 12: 9 (16 September 2020): 1. https://www.mdpi.com/1424-2818/12/9/357.

known as the rainforests of the sea. About 60,000 animals reside in coral reefs to spawn, breed, and feed.[50] Alarmingly, climate change and human activities seriously threaten coral reefs worldwide. There was a decline of 50% in global coral reef cover from 1957 to 2007.[51]

The Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and Timor-Leste form the Coral Triangle, which "is only 1.1% of the earth's surface but is home to a third of the world's coral reefs."[52] In the Philippines, there are more than 500 species of coral.[53] The country has the second-largest reef cover in Southeast Asia and the third-largest worldwide at over 25,000 square kilometers (Indonesia is first, with Australia second). The most developed of these, and one-third of the Philippine reef cover, are in the Kalayaan group of islands. Coral reefs support the livelihoods of fisherfolk by sustaining large quantities of fish for catch. They contribute a

50. Robles, Jr., *Endangered Species and Fragile Ecosystems in the South China Sea: The Philippine v. China Arbitration*, 62.

51. Tyler D. Eddy, Vicky W.Y. Lam, Gabriel Reygondeau, John F. Bruno, Yoshitaka Ota, and William W.L. Cheung, "Global decline in capacity of coral reefs to provide ecosystem services," *One Earth* 4, no. 9 (September 17, 2021): 1279. https://www.cell.com/one-earth/fulltext/S2590-3322(21)00474-7.

52. Reniel B. Cabral and Rollan C. Geronimo, "How important are coral reefs to food security in the Philippines? Diving deeper than national aggregates and averages," *Marine Policy* 91 (May 2018): 136.

53. Kennedy Warne, "Coral reefs in the Philippines are some of the world's most vibrant—but in peril," *National Geographic*, May 12, 2022, accessed on August 28, 2024, https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/article/philippines-reefs-are-some-of-the-most-vibrant-but-in-peril-feature.

significant portion of the total fishery production in the country.[54] Coral reefs also support the tourism industry for their aesthetic value. However, overfishing and dynamite fishing by Filipino fisherfolk have negatively impacted the coral reefs in the country. Damages by China to a reported 20,800 acres of coral reefs in the South China Sea (4,500 from island-building and 16,300 from giant clam harvesting) resulted in a depleted fish count.[55] Not surprisingly, fish count depletion leads to livelihood loss for fisherfolk, of whom many are economically disadvantaged. Hence, coral reef destruction has wide-ranging repercussions for fish and humans.

A reason noted earlier for the coral reef destruction is giant clam harvesting, which brings problems of its own. One could argue that their transformation into expensive jewelry and statues is an ecologically unjustifiable reason for their harvesting. Even so, their harvesting can lead to some imbalance in the coral reef ecosystem. Giant clams are food for fish like wrasse, triggerfish, and pufferfish.[56] Even when dying or dead, they serve as rich nutrient sources for scavengers like isopods,

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54. Natasha Charmaine A. Tamayo, Jonathan A. Anticamara, and Lilibeth Acosta-Michlik, "National Estimates of Values of Philippine Reefs' Ecosystem Services," *Ecological Economics* 146 (December 19, 2017): 635. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0921800917300812?ref=pdf_download&fr=RR-2&rr=8b9d6de-33b6e9b44.

55. Michaela Del Callar," China destroyed or damaged over 20,000 acres of coral reef in South China Sea –US think tank," GMA News, February 22, 2024, accessed on August 28, 2024, https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/898330/china-destroyed-or-damaged-over-20-000-acres-of-coral-reef-in-south-china-sea-us-think-tank/story/.

56. Mei Lin Neo, William Eckman, Kareen Vicentuan, Serena L.-M. Teo, Peter A. Todd, "The ecological significance of giant clams in coral reef ecosystems," *Biological Conservation* 181 (January 2015): 115. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0006320714004212?via%3Dihub.

ostracods, amphipods, leptostraca, mysids, and snails. Giant clams can also house fish in them, while their shell surfaces can host epibionts.[57] Ironically, giant clams are supposed to be better alternatives to elephant ivory yet harvesting them can impact the environment in ways as consequential as animal poaching. Giant clams provide valuable contributions to the coral reef ecosystem.

Development of Catholic Social Teaching on the Environment

It is important to note that Catholic Social Teaching (CST) develops through a series of socio-cultural and economic milieux. The first CST encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* (1891) by Leo XIII, spoke on the conditions of workers in Europe during the 19th century. *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) by Pius XI did something similar in the early 20th century. It should come as no surprise that the earliest stirring from the Church magisterium about environmental concerns stems from a particular milieu. The environmental movement arose in the mid-20th century and began when Rachel Carson, an American marine biologist, published on June 30, 1962, her landmark work "Silent Spring," a work critical of technological prowess and the impact of the pesticide dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane on crops. In light of this nascent environmentalism, the Apostolic Letter *Octogesima Adveniens* issued by Paul VI in 1971, commemorating *Rerum Novarum*, notes in paragraph 21:

> While the horizon of man is thus being modified according to the images that are chosen for him, another transformation is making itself felt, one which is the dramatic and unexpected consequence of human activity. Man is suddenly becoming aware that by an ill-considered exploitation of nature, he risks

57. Neo, et al., "The ecological significance of giant clams in coral reef ecosystems," 117.

> destroying it and becoming in his turn the victim of this degradation. Not only is the material environment becoming a permanent menace - pollution and refuse, new illness and absolute destructive capacity - but the human framework is no longer under man's control, thus creating an environment for tomorrow which may well be intolerable. This is a wide-ranging social problem which concerns the entire human family. The Christian must turn to these new perceptions in order to take on responsibility, together with the rest of men, for a destiny which from now on is shared by all.[58]

In the same year as *Octogesima Adveniens*, the Synod of Bishops, through *Justitia in Mundo*, observed that:

> The new technological possibilities are based upon the unity of science, on the global and simultaneous character of communications, and on the birth of an absolutely interdependent economic world. Moreover, people are beginning to grasp a new and more radical dimension of unity; for they perceive that their resources, as well as the precious treasures of air and water--without which there cannot be life-- and the small delicate biosphere of the whole complex of all life on earth, are not infinite, but on the contrary must be saved and preserved as a unique patrimony belonging to all human beings.[59]

Outside of magisterial documents, Paul VI addressed Maurice Strong, the Secretary General of the United Nations Conference on Environment, in Stockholm in 1972 with the following cautionary words:

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58. Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens*, *Vatican Archive*, May 14, 1971, accessed September 3, 2024, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_letters/documents/hf_p-vi_apl_19710514_octogesima-adveniens.html.

59. Synod of Bishops, *Justitia in Mundo*, (Catholic Charities, 1971), accessed September 3, 2024, https://cctwincities.org/education-advocacy/catholic-social-teaching/major-documents/justicia-in-mundo/.

> Today, indeed, there is a growing awareness that man and his environment are more inseparable than ever. The environment essentially conditions man's life and development, while man, in his turn, perfects and ennobles his environment through his presence, work, and contemplation. But human creativeness will yield true and lasting benefits only to the extent to which man respects the laws that govern the vital impulse and nature's capacity for regeneration. Both are united, therefore, and share a common temporal future.[60]

Following these messages, John Paul II made a bold speech for World Day of Peace on January 1, 1990, entitled "Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all of Creation." What makes this speech remarkable is that it situates the ecological crisis within salvation history, specifically the fall of humanity:

> Adam and Eve's call to share in the unfolding of God's plan of creation brought into play those abilities and gifts which distinguish the human being from all other creatures. At the same time, their call established a fixed relationship between mankind and the rest of creation. Made in the image and likeness of God, Adam and Eve were to have exercised their dominion over the earth (Gen 1:28) with wisdom and love. Instead, they destroyed the existing harmony by deliberately going against the Creator's plan, that is, by choosing to sin. This resulted not only in man's alienation from himself, in death and fratricide, but also in the earth's "rebellion" against him (cf. Gen 3:17-19; 4:12). All of creation became subject to futility, waiting in a mysterious way to be set free and to

60. Paul VI, "Message of His Holiness Paul VI to Mr. Maurice F. Strong, Secretary-General of the Conference on the Environment," *Vatican Archives*, June 1, 1972, accessed September 5, 2024, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/messages/pont-messages/documents/hf_p-vi_mess_19720605_conferenza-ambiente.html.

> obtain a glorious liberty together with all the children of God (cf. Rom 8:20-21).[61]

This biblical exegesis implies that the ecological crisis was originally a theological problem. Cecilia Deane-Drummond explains:

> [John Paul II] therefore identifies the root of ecological destruction as based fundamentally in 'an anthropological error' because human beings forget that their power to create 'is always based on God's prior and original gift of the things that are'. Human beings must, therefore, respect the requisites embedded in the natural world and its God-given purposes, 'which man can indeed develop but must not betray'.[62]

The quality of our relationship with the environment proceeds from our relationship with God. Such that: "[t]he commitment of believers to a healthy environment for everyone stems directly from their belief in God the Creator, from their recognition of the effects of original and personal sin, and from the certainty of having been redeemed by Christ."[63] His successor, Benedict XVI, included in his first homily as pope the following: "The external deserts in the world are growing because the internal deserts have become so vast. Therefore, the earth's treasures no longer serve to build God's garden for all to live in, but they have been made to serve the powers of

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61. John Paul II, "Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all of Creation," Message, *Vatican Website*, January 1, 1990, accessed September 3, 2024, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19891208_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.html.

62. Cecilia Deane-Drummond, "Joining in the Dance: Catholic Social Teaching and Ecology," *New Blackfriars* 93, no. 1044 (February 13, 2012): 201. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2011.01476.x.

63. John Paul II, *Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all of Creation.*

exploitation and destruction."[64] As a gesture of commitment to sustainability, he installed 2,400 solar panels on the rooftop of the Paul VI Hall in the Vatican in 2008 and converted the popemobile into a hybrid.[65] For these reasons, the media dubbed him the Green Pope. Furthermore, in his World Day of Peace message entitled "If you want to cultivate peace, protect creation" dated January 1, 2010, Benedict XVI noted:

> The true meaning of God's original command, as the Book of Genesis clearly shows, was not a simple conferral of authority, but rather a summons to responsibility. The wisdom of the ancients had recognized that nature is not at our disposal as "a heap of scattered refuse". Biblical Revelation made us see that nature is a gift of the Creator, who gave it an inbuilt order and enabled man to draw from it the principles needed to "till it and keep it" (cf. Gen. 2:15). Everything that exists belongs to God, who has entrusted it to man, albeit not for his arbitrary use. Once man, instead of acting as God's co-worker, sets himself up in place of God, he ends up provoking a rebellion on the part of nature, "which is more tyrannized than governed by him." Man, thus has a duty to exercise responsible stewardship over creation, to care for it and to cultivate it.[66]

Francis continued the sustainability endeavors on June 21, 2024, with the Apostolic Letter *Fratello Sole*, which entrusts the

64. Benedict XVI, "Homily of His Holiness Benedict XVI," *Vatican Archives*, April 24, 2005, accessed September 3, 2024, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2005/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20050424_inizio-pontificato.html.

65. Brian Roewe, "The first green pope: How Benedict's eco-theology paved the way for Francis," *Earthbeat*, January 4, 2023, accessed September 3, 2024, https://www.ncronline.org/earthbeat/faith/first-green-pope-how-benedicts-eco-theology-paved-way-francis.

66. Benedict XVI, "If you want to cultivate peace, protect creation," Message, *Vatican Website*, January 1, 2010, accessed September 3, 2024, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20091208_xliii-world-day-peace.html

President of the Governorate of Vatican City State and President of the Administration of the Patrimony of the Apostolic See "the task of constructing an agrivoltaic plant located within the extraterritorial zone of Santa Maria di Galeria that will guarantee, not only the power supply of the radio station there but also the complete energy sustenance of Vatican City State."[67] These massive efforts in the small size of the Vatican could put it on track as one of the most energy-efficient states in the world.

Christianity and Environmental Exploitation

It is good at this point to tackle the elephant in the room. Christianity appears to have enabled the exploitation of the environment through the mandate to subdue the earth and have dominion over creatures in Genesis 1:28.[68] This view is popular in the public imagination but is open to contestation. It gained traction in the modern period when Lyn White wrote the article "Historical Root of our Ecologic Crisis."[69] White argues: "Christianity in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions...not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploits nature for his proper ends."[70] According to Ricardo M. Puno, the interpretations of the verse in the patristic and medieval periods were interested in the allegorical and spiritual meanings. For

67. Francis, *Fratello Sole*, Apostolic Letter, June 21, 2024, accessed September 3, 2024, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/20240621-fratello-sole.html.

68. "God blessed them and God said to them: Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that crawl on the earth."

69. Lyn White, "The historical root of our ecologic crisis." *Science* 155, 3767 (March 10, 1967): 1203-1207.

70. White, "The historical root of our ecologic crisis," 1205.

example, Augustine viewed dominion as suggesting discipline over the irrational, which is connotative with the part of humanity prone to error. Later on, medieval scholars interpreted dominion as directing creation towards salvific ends. In the Renaissance, Francis Bacon promoted a more literal reading by advocating for a right over nature. Nevertheless, this right was subject to the needs of humanity, implying that any wanton use of nature was wrong. Decades later, John Locke read the Genesis text with the concept of private property in mind, justifying ownership of land. Regrettably, his reading served to underlie the colonization of lands in the Americas. At this point, it is evident that the interpretation of Genesis 1:28 varied through the centuries.

Another key exegetical factor is that the mandate to subdue the earth and have dominion over other creatures precedes the fall of humanity in Genesis 3. In the time before the fall, human beings and nature coexisted in an order. After the fall, humanity lost dominion, and relations ruptured between humanity and nature. This reading suggests that human involvement in environmental problems is not consistent with the divine mandate of dominion and subduing, but a consequence of the fall. Rereading White, it should be apparent why his argument is highly contestable. Christians have indeed participated in environmental exploitation, but to say that Christianity approves of it is unfair. Genesis 2:15 even has God mandating Adam and Eve to care for the Garden of Eden.[71] Despite the fall, humanity, as stewards, still has a special responsibility over the rest of creation.

71. "The Lord God then took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it."

Global Environmental Initiatives and the Church

Catholic concern for the environmental impact of the WPS Dispute is better understood within a global thrust toward environmental protection. Given that CST develops through a particular milieu, it is worth recounting the efforts in the global environmental sector in the past decades. Since the 1990s, there has been a renewed interest among international leaders in combating negative climate change. In 1992, the United Nations formed the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), a basic framework of principles for addressing climate change by stabilizing greenhouse gases. The UNFCCC entered into force on March 21, 1994. Three years later, delegates signed the Kyoto Protocol, an international treaty to reduce carbon emissions by 5.2% below 1990 levels from 2008 to 2012. In that period, global warming became a worldwide interest when the 2006 documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* by then-Vice President of the United States, Al Gore, sparked discussions on the potentially catastrophic effects of increasing global temperatures. By 2012, delegates at Doha agreed to extend the Kyoto Protocol to 2020.

It was clear, however, that further measures were necessary to mitigate the effects of global warming. The global community decided to enact another international treaty. On December 12, 2015, 196 parties adopted the Paris Agreement, which went into force on November 4, 2016. The Paris Agreement has the dual goals of maintaining "the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels" and limiting "the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels." On the ocean, the Paris Agreement has only this to say:

> Noting the importance of ensuring the integrity of all ecosystems, including oceans, and the protection of

> biodiversity, recognized by some cultures as Mother Earth, and noting the importance for some of the concept of "climate justice", when taking action to address climate change,[72]

One month after the Paris Agreement came into force, the United Nations issued a resolution on oceans and the law of the sea on December 23, 2016. The resolution contains 355 action points. In the context of this paper, the resolution has the following to say on the subject of coral reefs, citing the Rio+20 Document "The future we want" from 2012.

> 262. Recalls that, in "The future we want", States recognized the significant economic, social and environmental contributions of coral reefs, in particular to islands and other coastal States, as well as the significant vulnerability of coral reefs and mangroves to impacts, including from climate change, ocean acidification, overfishing, destructive fishing practices and pollution, and supported international cooperation with a view to conserving coral reef and mangrove ecosystems and realizing their social, economic and environmental benefits, as well as facilitating technical collaboration and voluntary information-sharing.[73]

Praiseworthy as these measures by the United Nations are, effective change can occur not just with the publication of policies but with the conversion of mind and heart. In this regard, the Church retains competence. Leading up to the Paris Agreement, Pope Francis issued the encyclical *Laudato Si'* in 2015, the most comprehensive magisterial document about the environment yet. The title is in old Italian and comes from the Canticle of the Creatures (or Brother Sun and Sister Moon) by Saint Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of those who promote

72. United Nations, *The Paris Agreement*, Paris, France, 2015, p. 2.

73. United Nations, *Oceans and the Law of the Sea*, New York, USA, 2016, p. 45.

ecology. The encyclical is composed of an introduction and six chapters.

Catholic Social Teaching and the West Philippine Sea

Pertinent to the WPS Dispute, *Laudato Si'* offers the following observations:

> 40. Oceans not only contain the bulk of our planet's water supply but also most of the immense variety of living creatures, many of them still unknown to us and threatened for various reasons. What is more, marine life in rivers, lakes, seas, and oceans, which feed a great part of the world's population, is affected by uncontrolled fishing, leading to a drastic depletion of certain species. Selective forms of fishing which discard much of what they collect continue unabated. Particularly threatened are marine organisms which we tend to overlook, like some forms of plankton; they represent a significant element in the ocean food chain, and species used for our food ultimately depend on them.
>
> 41. In tropical and subtropical seas, we find coral reefs comparable to the great forests on dry land, for they shelter approximately a million species, including fish, crabs, mollusks, sponges, and algae. Many of the world's coral reefs are already barren or in a state of constant decline. "Who turned the wonderworld of the seas into underwater cemeteries bereft of color and life?" This phenomenon is due largely to pollution which reaches the sea as the result of deforestation, agricultural monocultures, industrial waste and destructive fishing methods, especially those using cyanide and dynamite. It is aggravated by the rise in temperature of the oceans. All of this helps us to see that every intervention in nature can have consequences which are not immediately evident, and that certain ways of exploiting resources

> prove costly in terms of degradation which ultimately reaches the ocean bed itself.[74]

The above excerpts are in Part III: The Loss of Biodiversity of Chapter One: What is Happening to Our Common Home. Biodiversity refers to the variety of living creatures and their interactions. It signifies a healthy ecosystem because it entails a multi-layered food chain and mutual benefits among species. Inversely, biodiversity loss signifies an unhealthy ecosystem because it leads to a disrupted food chain and ecological imbalance. Importantly, *Laudato Si'* refers to non-human species as "fellow creatures of this world."[75] In that sense, they are of intrinsic value. Their loss is measured not by their relationship with humanity but to God. Wanton biodiversity loss is an offense against the Creator. Responding to biodiversity loss brought about by the WPS Dispute requires an integrated approach that accounts for the whole complexity of the issue. Thus, Chapter Four of *Laudato Si'* - Integral Ecology - becomes apparent. Integral ecology pertains to the cohesion binding human, natural, environmental, physical, and social ecologies. There is authentic development if each ecology is accounted for and complemented together. It has been characteristic of the modern world to bring forward human and social ecologies at the expense of others. CST does not believe that human and social ecologies are sustainable if the natural, environmental, and physical ecologies deteriorate. This way, human development is possible only by viewing the human person as part of creation and not apart from it.

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74. Francis, *Laudato Si'*, Encyclical Letter, May 24, 2015, accessed September 1, 2024' https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

75. Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 92.

Laudato Si' stands out among the papal encyclicals for its numerous citations of the episcopal conferences. It signifies a more collegial approach to CST. What is relevant for the WPS Dispute is that Francis cites the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) with the quote in the excerpt above: "Who turned the wonderworld of the seas into underwater cemeteries bereft of color and life?" Specifically, Francis cites the CBCP through their pastoral letter on ecology entitled "What is Happening to Our Beautiful Land?" issued on January 29, 1988. In that pastoral letter, the CBCP has this to say about the ocean:

> **Our Seas**
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> The beauty did not end at the shoreline. Our islands were surrounded by blue seas, fertile mangroves, and enchanting coral reefs. The coral reefs were a world of color and beauty with fish of every shape and hue darting in and out around the delicate coral reefs. *Perlas ng Silanganan* was an appropriate name for this chain of wooded islands, surrounded by clear seas, studded with coral reefs.
>
> **Deserts in the Sea**
>
> How can the fish swim in running sewers like the Pasig and so many more rivers which we have polluted? Who has turned the wonder world of the seas into the underwater cemeteries bereft of color and life? Imagine, only 5% of our corals are in pristine state! The blast of dynamite can still be heard on our coastal waters. We still allow *muro-ami* fishing methods which take a terrible toll both on the young swimmers and corals. Mine tailings are dumped into fertile seas like Calancan Bay in Sta. Cruz, Marinduque where they destroy forever the habitat of the fish. Chemicals are poisoning our lands and rivers. They kill vital organisms and in time they will poison us. The ghost of the dreaded Minamata Bay

> disease hangs over towns in the Agusan river basin and the Davao gulf.[76]

The claim that "only 5% of our corals are in pristine state" is subject to reverification, but the fact that this was years before the WPS Dispute reached its current state is a cause for worry. While the papal and episcopal magisterium have provided much food for thought regarding our responsibilities toward the environment, theologians have not been idle either. Elizabeth Johnson invites us to rethink the dominion paradigm and broaden our view beyond the stewardship paradigm.[77] Johnson questions the traditionally assumed hierarchical model of the dominion and stewardship paradigm, which has justified industrial development with high environmental costs and psychologically primed human beings into thinking they are apart from creation. In light of these concerns, Johnson favors a community of creation paradigm imbued with kinship. More than dominion or stewardship, kinship is drawn from the co-created relationship between us and the rest of creation. In some ways, this echoes the Canticle of the Creatures of St. Francis of Assisi, where even the sun and the moon are brother and sister, respectively. A community of creation proposes that "human beings and other species have more in common than what separates them."[78] Such a paradigm is profoundly theocentric, where relationships are reciprocal and oriented towards God.

Appropriating the community of creation paradigm for the WPS Dispute suggests that the marine life at

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76. Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, "What is Happening to Our Beautiful Land?", Pastoral Letter, 1988.

77. Elizabeth Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*, (New York: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2015), 1-352.

78. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love,* 268.

the center of the dispute is not a resource but a party that could have representation in legal discussions and proceedings. A legal case in Philippine jurisprudence supports this creative approach to CST. In 2015, the Supreme Court of the Philippines, no less, decided in favor of the petitioners in the case of *Resident Marine Mammals of the Protected Seascape Tanon Strait v. Secretary Angelo Reyes*.[79] What is of interest here is that the principal petitioners are not human beings but marine life, namely toothed whales, dolphins, porpoises, and other cetacean species. Gloria Estenzo Ramos and Rose-Liza Eisma-Osorio represented the animals as "Legal Guardians of the Lesser Life Forms and Responsible Stewards of God's Creations." Without tackling the case in-depth, it is worth reflecting on how the Philippine judiciary recognized the legal standing of non-human species. Taking inspiration from *Resident Marine Mammals*, more Filipinos could engage in citizen participation toward a peaceful resolution of the WPS Dispute by representing the coral reefs and other marine life in legal proceedings designed to pressure the Philippine government to act decisively. Perhaps the fisherfolk could act as representatives of the animals. In doing so, their relationship would change from catcher-and-catch to co-creation.

Avenues for Conversational Enrichment

Given the extensive environmental damage in the WPS, preventing more damage is necessary but insufficient as a policy moving forward. There needs to be evidence-based rehabilitation that restores the ecosystem to the greatest flourishing

79. *Resident Marine Mammals of the Protected Seascape Tanon Strait v. Secretary Angelo Reyes*, G.R. No. 180771 (Supreme Court of the Philippines 2015).

extent possible. The common good requires everyone, from the individual to the state, to support environmental rehabilitation in ways consistent with subsidiarity. Understandably, justice demands that those who committed damages be the ones to take primary responsibility. Nevertheless, in the context of the WPS Dispute, the Philippines would do well to plan and invest in evidence-based rehabilitation, even if it was not the one who committed much of the damage.[80] It cannot rationalize inaction because it did not cause the problem. The Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10: 25-37 teaches us that, though the Samaritan was not responsible for the broken state of the victim, he, like the Priest and Levite, was still morally responsible for helping the victim. The Philippines must accept that the moral obligation to rehabilitate the ecosystem in the WPS necessarily follows the damage done there. Concerningly, parts of the WPS may already be beyond full rehabilitation. For those not yet so, a triage system based on scientific data could help determine which parts to rehabilitate first, given a limited budget, available human resources, and equipment. By supporting evidence-based rehabilitation, the Philippines would adopt a more amicable approach over a disputative one.

One other point of CST that may help in the WPS Dispute is upholding the intrinsic goodness of creation. Interestingly, the concept of sustainability appears only twice in UNCLOS. Both times are not even under Part XII, but Article 61 (Conservation of Living Resources) of Part V (Exclusive Economic Zones) and Article 119 (Conservation of the Living Resources of the

80. The Philippines is partly culpable for environmental damages in the area. Some Filipino fisherfolk are known to damage coral reefs to draw the fish out, as the CBCP alluded to in their pastoral letter. The Philippine government must ensure that such dangerous methods are effectively prohibited. Justice and accountability must be equal for all sides of the WPS Dispute.

High Seas) of Part VII (High Seas).[81] Contextually, UNCLOS uses "sustainable" to refer to "yield." The phrasing in UNCLOS suggests that sustainability is mainly related to human consumption. It does speak about conservation 39 times (none under Part XII), but also with human consumption in mind. The UNCLOS must appreciate the intrinsic goodness of creation by relating sustainability and conservation to protecting and preserving the marine environment. Fortunately, there have been changes after UNCLOS. For example, the international community agreed on the Convention on Biological Diversity in 1992, which begins with the following words in the preamble: "*Conscious* of the intrinsic value of biological diversity and the ecological, genetic, social, economic, scientific, educational, cultural, recreational, and aesthetic values of biological diversity and its components (italics original)." It also uses the word "sustainable" 42 times. Still, UNCLOS remains the primary international law of the sea. As such, the intrinsic goodness of

81. Such measures shall also be designed to maintain or restore populations of harvested species at levels which can produce the maximum sustainable yield, as qualified by relevant environmental and economic factors, including the economic needs of coastal fishing communities and the special requirements of developing States, and taking into account fishing patterns, the interdependence of stocks and any generally recommended international minimum standards, whether subregional, regional or global (Article 61).

1.) In determining the allowable catch and establishing other conservation measures for the living resources in the high seas, States shall: (a) take measures which are designed, on the best scientific evidence available to the States concerned, to maintain or restore populations of harvested species at levels which can produce the maximum sustainable yield, as qualified by relevant environmental and economic factors, including the special requirements of developing States, and taking into account fishing patterns, the interdependence of stocks and any generally recommended international minimum standards, whether subregional, regional or global (Article 119).

creation needs to be reflected more in it. The United Nations should rethink UNCLOS to that end.[82]

In return, the WPS Dispute challenges CST to continue expanding its scope. Catholic social teaching traces its origins to *Rerum Novarum*, which tackled the labor issues in the West during the late 19th century. Over the next century, several magisterial documents have spoken about social development, urbanization, and labor. In the twenty-first century, the social dimension of Catholic social teaching need not be limited to human-human interactions. The integral ecological ethics of the Catholic Church, exemplified by *Laudato Si'*, reminds us that human beings are social creatures not only among themselves but with the rest of creation as well. If the lack of poverty does not exempt oneself, especially the Christian, from engaging people in poverty in the spirit of solidarity and compassion, then one needs to engage with the plight of non-human creatures even when one is not directly affected. Even though most people will not visit the disputed area to experience the coral reefs, there is still a call to collective action. Exercising solidarity and compassion only intra-species is no longer tenable and frankly irresponsible, given the numerous human-induced environmental problems affecting other creatures. CST must continue promoting the social dimension in terms of the relationships of human beings with the rest of creation. The WPS Dispute is not just a conflict between states. It is also between human beings and the rest of creation. Both cases need to end amicably sooner rather than later.

In fairness, the Chinese government does have a moral obligation to support its citizenry, even when it means drawing

82. Simi KK, "Marine Biodiversity Management under the UNCLOS: Scope and Challenges in the era of blue Economy Policy," *GLS Law Journal* 5, no. 2 (July 1, 2023): 102-112. https://glslawjournal.in/index.php/glslawjournal/article/view/109.

from the environment. How the Chinese government can do so in ways consistent with Catholic social teachings is a complicated issue with political and spiritual dimensions. The political is beyond the scope of this paper. As for the spiritual dimension, CST affirms the universal destination of goods. Thus, the goods of creation are meant for the whole of humankind, regardless of national and political affiliations. However, respecting human dignity must always guide the distribution of goods within the human family, which entails not risking the lives of anyone in a maritime conflict. Some of the activities of the Chinese military in the WPS have been dangerous for Filipino fisherfolk. Moving forward, open and honest collaboration between the governments toward the sustainable development of maritime resources is imperative for a peaceful resolution.

Conclusion

The West Philippine Sea Dispute is more than a political issue. It is an environmental one as well. Unless greater attention and action are drawn towards the environmental costs of the WPS Dispute, more damage is inevitable, especially to the coral reefs. It is concerning that prevention and rehabilitation may not be enough to fully restore the coral reefs in the maritime region to their natural landscape a few decades ago. Any permanent damage is an offense against creation. The Catholic Social Teaching disposes us to carefully discern our attitudes towards the environment and commit to integral ecological actions. Humanity can no longer treat the environment as secondary to political ambitions or developmental concerns. Instead, care for the environment should animate national policies and international relationships. This paper is an attempt to navigate through the WPS Dispute. I encourage

others to continue the conversation and act for the sake of creation.[83]

83. I thank Fr. Peter Knox, S.J., a South African theologian who taught Christian Environmental Ethics at the Loyola School of Theology, for his guidance in writing this paper. I greatly appreciate his meticulous reading and constructive comments. Any oversight is entirely my own.

"PRUDENT COOPERATORS OF THE EPISCOPAL COLLEGE" (*LUMEN GENTIUM* 28): AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE PROMISE OF OBEDIENCE IN THE RITE OF ORDINATION TO THE PRESBYTERATE

Cris Simon B. Abadilla

Introduction

According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)* 1567, the presbyter's call to serve the People of God is intrinsically linked to the mission of the bishop. Presbyters perform their duties in the name of the bishop, who has entrusted them with their pastoral mission. Therefore, presbyters should not act as if they own the parish or are entitled to its privileges. Instead, they must remember that they are "sent" by the bishop to fulfill their duties. This dependence of the presbyter on the bishop reflects the shared priesthood between them. At ordination, presbyters receive the bishop's threefold function to preach, sanctify, and govern. The liturgical gestures in the ordination ritual vividly manifest the relationship between the bishop and the presbyters. Presbyters should relate to the bishop as their father, while the bishop must regard the presbyters as his sons, brothers, and friends. This relationship is a crucial element of the promise of obedience that presbyters make. Obedience thus becomes a harmonizing aspect of the theology of priesthood, enabling presbyters to truly become prudent cooperators of the episcopal order.

However, one may ask how a priest can faithfully live out his promise of obedience. For some, to obey means to follow the bishop at all costs and not ask questions, and thus, being engaged in the discernment process regarding important matters in the diocese may be misconstrued as questioning the authority of the bishop *vis-à-vis* disobedience. This paper aims to look into the promise of obedience as LG 28 understands it, as it says: "On account of this sharing in their priesthood and mission, let priests sincerely look upon the bishop as their father and reverently obey him. And let the bishop regard his priests as his co-workers and as sons and friends, just as Christ called His disciples now not servants but friends." Therefore, in the study of the promise of obedience, there are two essential elements: a.) sharing of priesthood and mission, and b.) how obedience should be characterized. Furthermore, to provide a greater understanding of the promise of obedience, this paper will delve into the historical development of the promise of obedience in the ordination ritual. By doing so, the principle of *lex orandi, lex credendi et vivendi* may be applied.

The *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* (*Lumen Gentium)* offers a vision of priests as "prudent cooperators with the Episcopal order, its aid, and instrument, called to serve the people of God, constitute one priesthood with their bishop, although bound by a diversity of duties."[1] Among the significant theological developments in Vatican II is the revival of the patristic understanding of the figure of the bishop as the possessor and embodiment of the fullness of the priesthood. The *Presbyterorum Ordinis* 7 reads:

1. Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution On The Church (Lumen Gentium)*, 21 November 1964, Vatican Archive https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

> Priests, never losing sight of the fullness of the priesthood that the bishops enjoy, must respect in them the authority of Christ, the Supreme Shepherd. They must, therefore, stand by their bishops in sincere charity and obedience. This priestly obedience, imbued with a spirit of cooperation, is based on the very sharing in the episcopal ministry, which is conferred on priests through the Sacrament of Orders and the canonical mission.

This portion of *Presbyterorum Ordinis* affirms the dogmatic and sacramental context of *Lumen Gentium* 28 and highlights the authority of Christ in the office of the bishop. It is important to note that the concept of the "fullness of priesthood" is a necessary element in studying the promise of obedience, as presbyters only share in the priesthood and mission of the bishop. The priesthood and mission of the presbyters are rooted in the priesthood and mission of the bishop.

The *Decree on the Life and Ministry of the Priest* (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*) also states: "By sacred ordination and by the mission they receive from their bishops, presbyters are promoted to the service of Christ the Teacher, the Priest, and the King. They share his ministry of unceasingly building up the Church on earth into the People of God, the Body of Christ, and the Temple of the Holy Spirit." This statement highlights the identity of the priests in union with the bishop who possesses the "fullness of the priesthood," a phrase also found in *Lumen Gentium* 41. *The Decree on the Pastoral Office of the Bishop* further highlights the dependence of presbyters on their respective bishops: "For bishops enjoy the fullness of the sacrament of orders and priests depend on them in the use of their power." Thus, the ministry of priests should be understood as a stewardship of the mission entrusted to them by the local ordinary. Priests function not just in their capacity but are always in union with their local ordinary.

Furthermore, as the presbyters and the bishop are united in priesthood and mission, the presbyters promise obedience to the episcopal order, envisioning a universal ecclesial communion actualized in the concrete communion of bishops and priests in constant pastoral dialogue.[2] The council fathers also point out an essential feature of the sharing of priests in the one priesthood of the bishop by claiming that it is "an expression of the *communio* between bishops and priests as it had existed in the ancient Church."[3] Hence, the obedience of the priest to his bishop is his participation in the universal *koinonia*. This universal communion is oriented towards fulfilling the mission entrusted by Christ to his apostles, which is also extended to the order of bishops as their successors.

The promise of obedience is a necessary element of priesthood and mission. But what does it look like in the life of a diocesan clergy? *LG* 28 asserts that presbyters should regard their bishop as their father and reverently obey him, and the bishop should treat the presbyters as his co-workers and as sons and friends. The relationship between the presbyterate and the episcopate goes beyond the characterization of "boss-employee." But it can be surmised how necessary the dialogical relationship between the bishop and the priests is in fulfilling the promise of obedience. Obedience is not simply for the sake of unity and to avoid disruptions in the diocese, but rather it is about cultivating trust and charity for the sake of fulfilling the mission. As *Presbyterorum Ordinis* 15 puts it: This obedience is designed to promote the mature freedom of the children of God; by its very nature, it postulates that

2. Robert Billing, "The Presbyteral Council as an Expression of Synodality," Doctorate on Canon Law Thesis (Ottawa: Canada: St. Paul University, 2022), 302.

3. Billing, "The Presbyteral Council as an Expression of Synodality," 314.

in the carrying out of their work, spurred on by charity, they develop new approaches and methods for the greater good of the Church.

The Promise of Obedience Before the Pontificals

The concept of obedience, before its formalization within the pontifical, was largely implicit and expected of presbyters during the early Church. Obedience was closely linked to stability within a parish or assignment, with presbyters expected to remain and be stable in the locations to which they were assigned. However, as the Church expanded, so did its political structures. This growth led to some presbyters becoming itinerant preachers, wandering and conducting their ministry without a fixed assignment. Thus, these itinerant preachers have become a cause of conflict and problems in pursuing the pastoral activity of the local church. In response, Church laws were instituted to regulate these itinerant preachers, ensuring that presbyters remained in their current assignments. It mandated that no presbyter shall be ordained without a permanent and stable attachment.[4]

Furthermore, in the work of Strieder, he highlights the significance of Boniface, the metropolitan bishop of the Kingdom of the Franks, in pledging obedience to the Roman pontiff. This pledge was a practice previously observed only by the suffragan bishops of Rome. In the manuscript authored by Boniface, the promise of obedience is presented in a personalistic form, where he explicitly states his name and intention of allegiance to the Pope as the metropolitan bishop of

4. For more on the development of the promise of obedience before its codification in the 1917 *Code of Canon Law*, See Scott J. Hill, "Canon 273: Clerical Obedience: Canonical Obedience towards One's Bishop and Its Application," ProQuest Dissertations and Theses (J.C.D., United States -- District of Columbia, The Catholic University of America, 2021), 6–9.

Rome. This promise, ritualized by Boniface and signed at the altar of St. Peter, underscores his close connection with the Roman Pontiff and his dedication to pursuing the welfare of the Church within his metropolitan see. Boniface's promise of obedience demonstrates his commitment to the Church and papal authority.

It must be noted that the written promise of obedience was made outside the context of episcopal ordination. Boniface's gesture of sincerity and loyalty to the pope is particularly highlighted as he addresses it directly to the person of the Roman Pontiff. Regarding the relational aspect of the promise of obedience made by Boniface, Strieder writes:

> The promise is made to another person, here 'to you blessed Peter and his successors.' This is part of the relational nature of obedience. The promise is made from one person to another and his vicars and successors. It crosses time and structure but binds the person involved.[5]

As Boniface made a promise to the Roman Pontiff, Strieder intuits that "it would seem logical that the presbyters would make a promise of obedience to their bishop."[6] The promise of obedience made by Boniface must be noted for the form used by the Romano-Germanic pontifical that first indicated the promise of obedience used the personalistic form, *promitto* [I promise].

On the other hand, there are other forms by which the goal, the promise of obedience, wishes to attain is made manifest. For the Early Church, the relationship between the bishop and the presbyter is manifested through a simple ritual gesture – the kiss of peace. Aubry notes that in antiquity, there was no

5. Leon Strieder, *The Promise of Obedience: A Ritual History* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1980), 8.

6. Strieder, *The Promise of Obedience*, 9.

oath or formal bond of obedience, except by way of a silent kiss of peace, which remains the only form of the *Promitto* in the Eastern Church.[7] The kiss of peace, which precedes the literal articulation of the promise of obedience, already embodies the goal it wishes to achieve, serving as a ritual gesture that signifies the bond and unity between the presbyter and the bishop. Schneider thus observes that "when the promise of obedience was incorporated into the conclusion of the rite, the strong connection with feudal law overshadowed the kiss of peace as a sign of sacramental unity; the sealing of the oath of fidelity by the embrace of the lord became more prominent than the ancient sign of unity." [8]

The Promise of Obedience in the Romano-Germanic Pontifical

The oldest extant rite of the promise of obedience is found in the Romano-Germanic Pontifical (RGP), a *liber sacramentorum* [book of sacraments] written around 950. This text is a compilation of various ordines [ritual orders], which supersedes older versions by absorbing and combining them into a single book, known as the Romano-Germanic Pontifical of the tenth century, the Pontifical of Otto the Great, or simply, the Mainz Pontifical.[9] Regarding the dating of this pontifical, Vogel observes that the Romano-Germanic Pontifical is widely used in Rome. He notes that 'even as late as 1150, when the *Ordo officiorum Ecclesiae Lateranensis* [official liturgical book of

7. Andre Aubry, "A propos de la signification du 'Promitto,'" NRT v. 85 (1963): pp. 1063-1085, quoted in John Patrick Zenz, "Spirituality of Obedience for Diocesan Priests in Vatican II" (Rome, Italy, Pontificia Universitas Gregoriana Institutum Spiritualitatis, n.d.), 547.

8. Francis James Schneider, "Obedience to the Bishop by the Diocesan Priest in the 1983 Code of Canon Law," *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses* (J.C.D., United States -- District of Columbia, The Catholic University of America, 1990), 18.

9. Vogel, *Medieval Liturgy*, 143.

the Lateran Basilica] cited the RGP, it referred to it as an Ordo Romanus [Roman Guide].' By this time, the RGP had effectively become 'Roman' in the Latin Church."[10]

Regarding the structure of the promise of obedience in the Romano-Germanic Pontifical (RGP), Strieder observes that the formula adopts a personalistic form. He notes that the shift from the more personal *promitto* [I promise] to the more legalistic *vis-volo* [will you—I will] is driven by an increased emphasis on free consent, *consentiens* [consenting], which was also an essential element in the concept of marriage at the time.[11] Strieder further notes that the use of *consentiens* in the rite signifies that the ordinand is entering into a contract with the Church. The local ordinary is required to ask the ordinand if he is submitting to the Church›s authority freely and willingly, a process that is accomplished effortlessly in the form of a question.[12] Strieder additionally notes:

> Concerning the structure, we can see that we have an amalgamation of two structures. First, we find the will-you-I-will structure followed by the more ancient and personalistic *I promise* structure common to the promises we have already seen.[13]

Strieder emphasizes the importance of relationality in the promise of obedience, asserting that the ordinand must freely commit himself to the service of the Church.[14] This relational aspect is further underscored by the inclusion of *iustitiam et ministerium* [justice and ministry] in the ritual text, as Strieder suggests. The promise of obedience in the Romano-Germanic

10. Vogel, *Medieval Liturgy*, 239.

11. Strieder, *The Promise of Obedience*, 20.

12. Strieder, *The Promise of Obedience*, 20.

13. Strieder, *The Promise of Obedience*, 21.

14. Strieder, *The Promise of Obedience*, 21.

Pontifical is directed solely to the ordaining prelate. The ritual text of the promise of obedience reflects the context in which the RGP is written, where the bishop must ensure that the presbyters he ordains are loyal to him and willingly serve the diocese. The RGP is thus crafted to provide structural freedom for the diocese to perform its pastoral duties, in contrast to the proprietary churches controlled by local lords. Moreover, the ritual text notably uses the term *parrochiam* [parish] in the rite. Strieder writes:

> The text uses the words 'parish' or 'diocese' (*parocchia*). Like 'diocese' (*diocesis*), 'parish' has become part of the common vocabulary. Both terms have roots in the Greek vocabulary of marriage and running households. In Greek, 'parochos' was one who goes beside another riding in a chariot, and the 'ochos' was one who attends a bridegroom. Later, he was seen as the administrator of that person›s affairs. In our text, it is clear that *parochia* means what we would today call 'diocese.[15]

As noted above, since the ordinand ministers within the territory of the local ordinary, he must ensure that the person he ordains will fulfill his responsibilities. During this period, proprietary churches are prevalent in Germany, where lesser nobles and private families frequently award ecclesiastical offices, take shares of income (including tithes), and freely buy, sell, and bequeath ecclesiastical rights with little regard for the perils of simony. [16] Against this backdrop, the promise of obedience is included in the rite of ordination for priests. The transfer of vassalage from local lords to local ordinaries liberates presbyters from the interference of the nobility.

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15. Strieder, *The Promise of Obedience*, 21.

16. John Howe, "The Nobility's Reform of the Medieval Church," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 93, No. 2 (April, 1988), 320.

Immixtio Manuum [Joining of Hands]: The Promise of Obedience in the Pontifical of William Durandus

The ordination rites in the Pontifical of William Durandus introduce new gestures that add symbolic significance to the priestly ministry. Durandus combines various customs with Roman traditions to create a series of enriched rites for pontifical services, including the *immixtio manuum*. Strieder notes that this ritual mirrors the feudal rite of vassalage, although during the time of Durandus, proprietary churches were not a concern. He likely adopts these gestures to illustrate the homage or fealty common during this period.

The inclusion of *immixtio manuum* may also be influenced by the rites of religious profession in monasteries, particularly those initiated by the Cluniac reform. In this reform, dependent priories run by priors take oaths of loyalty into the hands of their abbots, resembling vassals. This gesture is adopted by the Rule of Augustine in the twelfth century and subsequently by other mendicant and monastic orders.[17] Strieder postulates that the rapid incorporation of *immixtio manuum* into the Pontifical of Durandus reflects the influence of these religious professions. He further asserts that "the promise made by joining hands symbolizes a reciprocal relationship... In this sense, it is a richer symbol of the nature of obedience as relational."[18]

Pontificale Romanum of 1596: Ordination of Presbyters

During the time of the Council of Trent, the primary concern was power and jurisdiction. This context is reflected

17. Kempf in Jedin, *Handbook of Church History*, 3:325 quoted in Strieder, *The Promise of Obedience: A Ritual History*, 63.

18. Strieder, *The Promise of Obedience*, 64.

in the promise of obedience in the *Pontificale Romanum* of 1596. The rite carefully specifies to whom the ordinand makes his promise of obedience, directing it to his immediate superior. Consequently, a cleric regularly promises obedience to his superior, while a diocesan cleric promises it to his bishop.

The promise of obedience in the *Roman Pontifical* of 1596 is formulated with a keen awareness of its juridical implications. It provides specific guidelines regarding whom the ordinand makes his promise, offering distinct options for both secular and regular clerics. Furthermore, the kiss of peace following the promise of obedience seals the sacred bond between the bishop and the presbyter.

Strieder theorizes that the prevailing issue was jurisdiction, not priestly powers. He writes: "The major theological concern now bound up with this promise of obedience is that of priestly faculties. To be a presbyter of good standing who could offer Mass and hear confessions."[19] The promise of obedience thus revolves around this area, and its context has shifted to a juridical one. The newly ordained minister promises obedience to his bishop in return for the faculties necessary to function as a priest. Furthermore, Strieder writes:

> Obedience implies that a presbyter will do what his bishop wishes in return for the jurisdiction to do his presbyteral work. A disobedient presbyter will have his faculties withdrawn. Thus, obedience for presbyters had become a method of both good order and control.[20]

19. Strieder, *The Promise of Obedience*, 49.

20. Strieder, *The Promise of Obedience*, 49.

The 1968 Rites of Ordination: *De Ordinatione Diaconi, Presbyteri et Episcopi*

The reform inaugurated by the Second Vatican Council is distinguished from all other historical liturgical reforms by its pastoral emphasis. The primary goal of this reform is to encourage the participation and active involvement of the people of God in liturgical celebrations.[21] *The Dogmatic Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*) mandated the revision of the ordination rites. Specifically, *SC* 76 states: "Both the ceremonies and texts of the ordination rites are to be revised. The address given by the bishop at the beginning of each ordination or consecration may be in the mother tongue." To achieve this, the Sacred Council mandated the creation of a preparatory commission to pave the way for its implementation.

The Apostolic Constitution *Pontificalis Romani* promulgates the revised ordination rites for deacons, presbyters, and bishops in 1968. In its preliminaries, it elucidates the Church's teaching on the nature and effects of the three degrees of the sacrament of orders, drawing heavily on the writings of the Second Vatican Council, particularly *Lumen Gentium*. In the 1968 rite of ordination, the promise of obedience is moved from post-communion to immediately following the bishop's examination of the ordinand. This repositioning underscores the significance of both the examination and the promise of obedience, emphasizing their precedence before the actual ordination. In the ritual text, the examination and the promise of obedience are implied as essential prerequisites for ordination. By placing the promise of obedience directly after the bishop's examination, it acquires new liturgical meaning,

21. Annibale Bugnini, *The Reform of the Liturgy* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1990), 5.

highlighted by the questions posed by the bishop during the examination. The examination embodies the threefold ministry of Jesus Christ as priest, prophet, and king, reflecting the Second Vatican Council's understanding that the priest is not merely one who celebrates the Eucharist for the faithful but also bears the responsibility to preach the Word of God and shepherd God's flock.

1990 Revised Rites: The Ordination of Bishops, Presbyters, and Deacons

In the 1990 revised rites for the ordination of bishops, presbyters, and deacons, the formulation of the promise of obedience remains unchanged. However, there is a notable shift in the order presented in the title: the ordination of a bishop is now listed first, followed by that of presbyters and then deacons. This reordering reflects the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, which emphasize that a bishop possesses the fullness of the priesthood, a role in which presbyters and deacons share. Strieder elaborates on this by stating, "The use of the singular reflects the unitive function of the one who serves in the place of the apostles."[22] The rites for the ordination of presbyters and deacons follow in the plural, illustrating the theological reality of an order of presbyters and deacons surrounding the local bishop.

Regarding the promise of obedience, the same wording is used in the ordination of both presbyters and deacons. Strieder notes that the similarity in wording between the rites of ordination for these two distinct orders fails to reflect the differences in ministry that deacons and presbyters exercise. He points out that the promise of obedience, as expressed in both ordinations, does not correspond to the theological

22. Strieder, *The Promise of Obedience*, 94.

reality they represent: presbyters share in the priesthood of their bishops, while deacons are ordained for ministry, not for the priesthood.[23]

Another innovation in the 1990 revised rites is that when the ordinand is a cleric regular, he is asked to make a promise of obedience to both the diocesan bishop and his legitimate superior. The inclusion of this dual promise of obedience in the ordination of cleric regulars reflects the teaching of *Lumen Gentium* 28, which states:

> In virtue of their common sacred ordination and mission, all priests are bound together in intimate brotherhood, which naturally and freely manifests itself in mutual aid, spiritual as well as material, pastoral as well as personal, in their meetings and the communion of life, of labor and charity.

Furthermore, *Christus Dominus* 35, particularly sections 1 and 4, indicates that clerics regular or religious individuals, in general, must align themselves with the bishop to ensure pastoral harmony within the diocese. This necessitates proper coordination between the religious and the diocesan bishop. The commitment of obedience made by clerics regular to the diocesan bishop transcends the mere delegation of priestly authority, which is conferred by the bishop to benefit the local diocese. This promise of obedience signifies a broader evolution within the Church's ecclesiology and enriches the theological understanding of the episcopacy as the fullness of the order of the priesthood. Consequently, the intention of including the promise of obedience of clerics regular to the diocesan bishop is to ensure that their public ministry and worship are aligned with the vision and mission of the Diocese in which they reside.

23. Strieder, *The Promise of Obedience*, 110-113.

However, the promise of obedience of the clerics regularly imposes certain difficulties. Susan Wood writes:

> The problems with the promise of obedience for a religious presbyter are: (1) the conflict between his potential mobility and the original purpose of such a promise; (2) the normativity of a diocesan parish life for our understanding of presbyteral ministry which is not the pastoral experience of many religious presbyters; and (3) the conflict between obedience to a diocesan bishop and religious autonomy and exemption.[24]

With that said, the promise of obedience made by clerics regular should be different from the promise made by diocesan presbyters. It must be clear that clerics regular enjoy a privilege of exemption stipulated by *Christus Dominus* 35. Therefore, the bishop must respect this exemption and recognize the limits of his authority. He can approve or deny a presbyter's assignment to a parish in his diocese staffed by a religious community, but he cannot arbitrarily reassign that presbyter to another ministry.[25]

Notable in the 1990 revised rites is the introductory note, which provides a general introduction to all the rites, focusing on the theology of ordination, the structure, and potential adaptations. The *praenotanda generalia* offers this introduction regarding the ordination of presbyters. It states that although the presbyter does not possess the fullness of the priesthood and only shares their *potestas* [power] with the bishop, they are consecrated in the image of Christ, the supreme Shepherd and

24. Susan Wood, *Sacramental Orders* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 109.

25. Wood, *Sacramental Orders*, 111.

priest. Consequently, they should preach the gospel, feed the faithful, and celebrate the sacraments.[26]

Lastly, the 1990 revised edition fortifies the 1968 edition of the rites of ordination as regards the role of the priests as helpers of the bishop and that they are consecrated to: preach the Gospel, shepherd the faithful, and celebrate divine worship as true Priests of the New Testament. The *praetonanda* in the ordination of presbyters mentions the strong image of presbyters as "cooperators" with the bishops. Strieder notes that the word is important because it contains the theology of the priesthood of Vatican II. It echoes the theology of the priesthood, which is not just centered on the Eucharist but rather a sharing in the fullness of the priesthood of the bishop, whose duty is to preach the word of God, celebrate the sacraments, and shepherd God's flock.

Providi cooperatores Ordinis Nostri in the Consecratory Prayers of the 6th Century Until the Tridentine Reforms

At the outset of the ordination rituals, the perception of the presbyterate as inferior to the bishop becomes more pronounced. The term "sacerdos" is used exclusively to address the bishop, indicating that the bishop holds the highest rank of priesthood. The phrase "ordinis nostri" or "order" should not be mistaken for episcopal collegiality, a prominent theological framework during the Second Vatican Council. Power notes that "ordo" during this period pertains to "rank," indicating

26. "Decretum," *De Ordinatione Episcopi, Presbyterorum et Diaconurum: "Presbyteri, quamvis pontificatus apicem non habeant et in exercenda sua potestate ab Episcopis pendeant, cum eis tamen sacerdotali honore coniuncti sunt et, vi sacramenti Ordinis, ad imaginem Christi, summi atque æterni Sacerdotis, ad Evangelium prædicandum fidelesque pascendos et ad divinum cultum celebrandum consecrantur ut veri Sacerdotes Novi Testamenti."*

that the episcopate constitutes the first order, and the presbyterate represents a lesser rank, as the ritual text refers to it as the second order.[27] Therefore, each presbyter holds an inferior position compared to his local bishop.

The phrase "*sint providi cooperatores ordinis nostri*" appears in the *Veronense*, a collection of *Libelli Missarum* (leaflets for mass) dated to approximately the 6th century CE. This phrase is found in the Verona Sacramentary as part of the intercessory prayer in the consecratory prayer for ordination to the presbyterate. The Church intercedes that the ordinand receive the second rank of priesthood, proper to presbyters. During this time, the Church enjoyed the freedom offered by the state, gaining prominence in the courts and palaces of the kingdoms. Catholicism in the 6th century became a formidable force in society, and the number of Catholics increased. To address the growing number of the faithful, the Church ordains men as presbyters so they can administer to the faithful in the celebration of the Eucharist and lead the community. As prudent cooperators with the bishops, presbyters are expected to live out the values of the Kingdom and be pastorally zealous in the communities to which they are sent. The inclusion of this phrase in the consecratory prayer shaped the theology of priesthood at that time and predominantly influenced the life and ministry of the presbyters.

Despite the Church facing various challenges as it grows in number and prominence, the understanding of the presbyterate as a cooperator with the bishop remains prevalent and necessary. The presbyterate during the early medieval period, from the 6th to the 10th century, gained its rank in the social class, with its work largely associated with the administration

27. David N. Power, *Ministers of Christ and His Church: The Theology of the Priesthood* (London: G. Chapman, 1969), 70.

of sacraments in various localities. Thus, the phrase retains its theological meaning in the Gelasian Sacramentary and the Pontifical of Egbert from the 8th century. The ministry of bishops during this time was crucial in every locality, with specific sacramental duties reserved exclusively for them. The seven clerical orders—ostiarius, exorcist, lector, acolyte, subdeacon, deacon, and presbyter—represent degrees of participation in the ministry of the Episcopacy. These ranks are seen as a ladder of offices through which a candidate, starting from the lowest, might progress through the *cursus honorum* to the highest rank, the Episcopacy, considered the most perfect in divine service.[28]

The *Roman Pontifical* is revised after 500 years, following the Second Vatican Council. The 1968 edition, based on the *Romano-Germanic Pontifical*, retains Durandus's gestures and reflects Vatican II's theological and liturgical reforms. Key revisions include the repositioning of the promise of obedience to precede the prayer of ordination, now situated after the ordinand's examination. This restructured ordination ritual emphasizes the alignment between ritual actions and the spoken formula, a notable departure from the 1596 *Pontifical*. The phrase 'providi cooperatores ordinis nostri,' integrated into the Dogmatic Constitution (article 28) as "*presbyteri, ordinis Episcopalis providi cooperatores*," emerges as a central theme in Vatican II's theology of priesthood.

Development of "Providi Cooperatores Ordinis Nostri" in the Text of LG 28: Salient Points from the Council Interventions and Drafts

The first mention of "cooperator" can be found in the intervention made by Bishop Alexander Renard of Versailles.

28. Margaret Deanesly, *A History of the Medieval Church 590 - 1500*, Reprinted (London: Routledge, 1994), 29.

Bishop Renard pointed out several things in the intervention he made. He noted how lacking the dogmatic foundation of the priesthood was. When the schema mentioned the share in the "paternal abundance" of the bishop, the schema failed to discuss the dogmatic foundation of the phrase. Bishop Renard used the phrase *Presbyter etenim episcopi sacerdotio participat*[29] to describe the priesthood of the presbyters. He noted that presbyters share the priesthood of the bishop and thus, the presbyters should function not only in the work of administration of sacraments and celebrating the Eucharist but also in the work of preaching and prayer.

Two significant points emerge from Bishop Renard's intervention. First, presbyters cooperate with the episcopal college. Bishop Renard deliberately avoids the term *adiumentum* in his intervention, choosing instead to use "cooperator," a term present in the liturgical text. He describes presbyters as priests of the second rank, reflecting the view of priesthood in the liturgical prayers. Second, presbyters form a presbyteral college where the ontological bond between the presbyters and the bishop requires nurturing. Bishop Renard's intervention becomes a crucial foundation in shaping the dogmatic understanding of the priesthood.

Following the written and oral interventions during the first session, the Theological Commission begins drafting a new version of *De Ecclesia*. This revised text aims to fulfill the Council Fathers' desire for a more pastoral document that establishes a stronger foundation for the relationship between the episcopacy and the presbyterate. During this process, the Commission receives a significant contribution in the form

29. "Indeed, the priest participates in the priesthood of the bishop". See *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II: Periodus prima, pars IV*, 345.

of a text primarily authored by Monsignor Gerard Philips of Louvain.

In the second version of the draft, priests are defined in relation to bishops. First, they are described as "helpers" of the bishops in their societal work. Second, they are acknowledged as true priests, albeit of "second dignity," since bishops hold the highest degree of priesthood.

Priests act on behalf of the bishop as his "representatives," having received "the grace of their abundant paternal fullness." In the footnote, Philips notes that the image of priests is derived from the *Roman Pontifical*, using the analogy of Aaron and his sons, a theme prevalent in many liturgical texts. He further explains that this depiction is based on the seventy wise men chosen to assist Moses, a motif present in all liturgical texts, including the Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus of Rome.[30]

In the new draft written by Philips, the phrase *providi cooperatores ordinis episcopalis* appears. Philips uses the term *providi cooperatores* to illustrate the seventy wise men who ruled with Moses, as noted in his footnote, which references the ordination prayers in the *Roman Pontifical*. Philips interestingly draws from ancient texts to support the notion that priests belong to a secondary rank, lower than the priesthood of bishops.

In the commentary of the text found in the *Acta,* Philips writes that the section on priesthood was drawn upon from the *Roman Pontifical*. The notes on the draft read:

> Priests, according to the words of the Pontifical book, are priests of the second rank and co-operators of the Episcopal Order, whose principal functions are enumerated. They are sent by the Bishop, or if they are exempt, by the Roman Pontiff, to care for souls.

30. Philips, "History of the Constitution," 113.

> All, however, from their union with the Bishop, obtain spiritual and apostolic vigor, and are three times united with one another in solidarity.[31]

The presbyterate, as cooperators of the Episcopal College, gave rise to several interventions from the council fathers. They noted how the *providi cooperatores* should be exercised. They also lobbied for a longer section on the presbyterate, which can nuance the framework of the priesthood of the Second Vatican Council. After the session, the council fathers considered the draft presented by Msgr. Gerard Philips is inadequate, especially in its treatment of the topic of priesthood. They identified a significant omission in acknowledging the role of priests as collaborators within the Episcopal College.

In the *praenotanda* given at the beginning of the third session of Vatican II, the drafters of the third draft of *Lumen Gentium* removed phrases such as "of second rank" and "of second dignity" from the *Roman Pontifical*, as well as the phrase "of the abundance of his paternal fullness." These revisions aimed to eliminate any juridical and external implications of the priesthood. They clarified the understanding of *gratiam de sua paternae plenitudinis abundantia transfundere*,[32] emphasizing that priesthood is not derived from the bishop but is a participation in the priesthood of Christ. Consequently, the bishop and the presbyters form one presbyterium, with the bishop serving as the head. The document then discusses the relationship between the bishop and the presbyters, highlighting

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31. *"Presbyteri, secundum verba libri Pontificalis, sunt secundae dignitatis sacerdotes et cooperatores Ordinis episcopalis, quorum praecipua munera enumerantur. Ab Episcopo, vel si exempti sunt, a Romano Pontifice ad curam animarum mittuntur. Omnes autem, ex coniunctione cum Episcopo, vigorem spiritualem et apostolicum obtinent, ac solidari ter inter se uniuntur."* See *AS* II/I, 254.

32. Author's translation of a phrase meaning "Pours grace out of the abundance of his paternal fullness."

the mutual obedience and trust that should characterize their interaction. The bishop, in turn, must exhibit both paternal and filial affection towards the presbyters.[33]

As requested by 226 Fathers, the article concerning priests and deacons has been repositioned after the section discussing bishops. This repositioning enhances the logical progression of the discussion on episcopacy and emphasizes the nature, role, and dignity of priests as bishops.[34]

After the discussions and intervention in the second session of the council, the dogmatic framework of the priesthood was expanded. Hence, as the main focus of this section, the phrase *providi cooperatores ordinis nostri* can be found in the third paragraph of article 28. It reads:

> Presbyters, as prudent cooperators of the episcopal order, its complement and organ, are called to serve the people of God and constitute one presbyterium, albeit entrusted with diverse offices. In each local congregation of the faithful, they make the bishop present in a certain way, with whom they are associated with trust and a generous spirit, taking on part of his duties and concerns and exercising daily care.

The new text presented in 1964 reflects the final version of Article 28, incorporating substantial paragraphs dedicated to presbyters and points raised during the 1963 discussions. One significant modification in the 1964 draft emphasized the bond between the presbyter and the bishop, surpassing a merely cultic function.[35]

The *praenotanda* explains the changes in the text. Notably, the new text mentions priestly obedience, anchoring the

33. *AS* III/I, 258.

34. *AS* III/II, 211-212.

35. *AS* III/VIII, 96-97.

priesthood of bishops and presbyters in their participation in the priesthood of Christ. This perspective moves away from a purely juridical understanding of the priesthood, showcasing a more holistic viewpoint. The shared priesthood of Christ between presbyters and bishops is presented as a permanent spiritual endowment, forming a genuine, necessary partnership in leading the people of God.[36] This bond is not defined by positivistic definitions or juridical acts but as a gift of the Spirit.[37]

Grillmeier notes that the cooperation of the presbyters is deeply rooted not just with his local ordinary but with the entire episcopal order. "The office of priest in the Church cannot be properly seen unless the order of bishops includes in some way the priestly state, which must be seen in the perspective of the common priesthood of all the faithful." [38] Consequently, the collaboration between presbyters and the Episcopal Order, including the Pope, transforms into a service for the world and humanity. The pastoral efforts of presbyters unite and organize God's family, serving as a unifying influence for all people.[39]

The role of presbyters encompasses more than just cultic activities, as described by Trent. The phrase *providi cooperatores ordinis nostri*, found in the consecratory prayers of the ordination ritual, has guided the Council Fathers in discerning the role of presbyters during the Second Vatican Council.

36. Paul Cordes, "Article 7," Herbert Vorgrimler, ed., *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. IV (Vatican Council, New York: Crossroad, 1989), 239.

37. Grillmeier, "Chapter III, Article 28," on Vorgrimler, *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, 1989, II:223.

38. Vorgrimler, *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, 1989, II:223.

39. Vorgrimler, *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, 1989, II:227.

This phrase takes on new significance as the understanding of priesthood evolves. Presbyters, as *providi cooperatores ordinis nostri*, share in the office of the bishop, participating in Christ's three-fold mission of teaching, sanctifying, and governing. While the phrase emphasizes the personal responsibility of the presbyter in his office, he remains under the authority of the local ordinary and must obediently follow his directives. However, the nature of this obedience has shifted. As *providi cooperatores*, the presbyter owes his bishop filial love and obedience, for both are sharers in the priesthood of the Eternal High Priest. The shared priesthood of the presbyters and the bishop anchors priestly obedience in a deeper spiritual and collegial context.

Conclusion

Obedience is more accurately understood as a gift to the presbyterate rather than a hindrance. It grants the presbyter genuine freedom, allowing all his actions to be oriented towards advancing the Kingdom by participating in Christ's threefold ministry of preaching, sanctifying, and governing. Obedience, as envisioned by the Second Vatican Council, is not marked by servility or blind submission to authority; rather, it is characterized by a spirit of cooperation. A presbyter fulfills his vow of obedience by collaborating with his bishop and serving as a faithful co-worker. He places complete trust in his bishop, prioritizing the common good over personal interests.

However, obedience is not a one-sided obligation but a reciprocal relationship. Just as presbyters offer trust and loyalty to their bishops, bishops are called to be fathers and friends to their presbyters, treating them as co-workers rather than competitors. In this dynamic, obedience nurtures the bond between the presbyter and the bishop. As Pope Francis writes, "Obedience is not a disciplinary attribute but the

deepest sign of the bonds uniting us in communion. To obey, in this case obeying the Bishop, means to learn how to listen, to remember that no one 'owns' God's will, which must be understood only through discernment."[40] Problems arise when this relationship becomes imbalanced—either when bishops fail to listen to their presbyters, disrupting harmony within the presbyterate, or when presbyters forget their role as sons and helpers to their bishops, neglecting the reality that they share in the priesthood only through their union with the bishop. To address such issues, both the Second Vatican Council and Canon Law mandate the establishment of a presbyteral council in every diocese, fostering authentic dialogue and ensuring that presbyters can fully engage in the mission they share with the episcopal order. This reciprocal relationship enhances the unity and effectiveness of the Church's mission.

40. Pope Francis, "Address in the International Theological Symposium on the Priesthood," in Marc Ouellet, ed., *A Fundamental Theology of the Priesthood* (New York: Paulist Press, 2023), xxi.

NEGOTIATING THEOLOGICAL MEANING IN CONTEMPORARY FILM

Shimbo Pastory William, C.S.Sp.

Introduction

The emergence of films[1] has transformed permanently the traditional art of story-telling globally. The rise of contemporary films has gradually positioned films among the dominant cultural media alongside the oral tradition. Anthropologists[2] consider film as a vehicle for traditional storytelling forms.

Centuries of humankind's existence have seen storytelling in its diversity as an essential vehicle for the deeply cherished cultures, values, histories, and experiences of the people of the respective social groups. Story-telling wraps the human experience with the fine cover of language and passes it on to the young ones in a flowing continuum through the available

1. The history of film is traced back to the 1890s when the medium was invented. However, the study of this history is a recent development, as there are no film histories written before the 1970s as films were regarded as mere entertainment. 1895 is considered to be the birth year of cinema, with cinemas being established in most major cities in 1896. James Chapman refers to Cinema as 'the last machine of the Victorian Age.' Films started as short single-shot 'actualities', to 'scenics' (travelogue films), phantom rides (camera on vehicle), 'topicals' (newsworthy events), and later narrative films, which even further added to the 'social respectability of cinema.' See James Chapman, *Cinemas of the World: Film and Society from 1895 to the Present* (London: Reaktion Books, 2003). 15-19, 52, 54-57).

2. Carol Geddes, "The Use of Film as a Vehicle for Traditional Storytelling Forms," *Arctic Anthropology*, 40, no. 2 (2003). https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/19/article/383055/pdf. 65. ; and, Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in Film and Television* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 8, 39, 56.

media. Story-telling has been an indispensable yet adaptable social construct because, in its purpose to communicate life's realities, lessons, and myths, it accommodates new ways of communication as they emerge and evolve in society.

The lead research question for this paper is: "How do contemporary films function as social constructs that shape identity and theological meaning negotiation for young viewers?" A follow-up inquiry to that is on the effective theological and pastoral approaches to help nurture and safeguard the faith of young people who are exposed to contemporary films of all kinds. Particular focus on 'negotiation of meaning' is triggered by the scholarship of Jesuits John Pungente and Monty Williams, who appropriated the Ignatian Spirituality and particularly the Ignatian Exercises in experiencing God in the filmic realities.[3] It is worth noting that contemporary films, even when not explicitly religious, allow theological engagement through their socially rooted narratives in which young people can discover God, who loves and saves humanity even in filmic portrayals of human stories.

This paper will also explore how young Christian viewers interpret the films they watch from the Christian lens, and also seek to understand how Christian salvation is seen in films' storytelling even without them being directly or specifically Christian films. Young Gen Zs (born 1997-2012) who have grown up with later bits of contemporary films around them are influenced differently by them as compared to Gen Ys (born 1981-1996) and Gen Xs (born 1965-1980) who have more

3. John Pungente and Monty Williams. *Finding God in the Dark: Taking the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius to the Movies* (Ottawa: Novalis, 2004).

comparative grounds regarding contemporary[4] films (from 1950s -), given their experiences. The methodology is a merger of theological hermeneutics and qualitative film analysis.

Film as Social Construct

Film as a narrative and social device

Film needs a context from which it is fashioned to be at the same time a three-fold project, which Graeme Turner explains as 'an entertainment, a narrative, and a social event.'[5] Films mirror culture in a complicated dynamic; and reflect attitudes, beliefs, trends, issues, and events.[6] The oftentimes seamless merger of fiction and non-fiction in film is an important backdrop for the multi-faceted role of film in the wider and diverse society. Multiple questions arise as storytelling navigates the narrative through delicate pathways when presented in the form of film.

A film director, Michael Roemer, writes in his book *Telling Stories* that "Story is an encounter with the non-human, the incomprehensible, the meaningless." He further adds, "In story, crises, and confrontations accelerate changes that, in life, occur gradually and almost imperceptibly, and so make

4. John C. Brown and Timothy W. Guinnane, *Scarcity and Frontiers: How Economies Have Developed Through Natural Resource Exploitation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), chap. 13, https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/scarcity-and-frontiers/contemporary-era-from-1950-to-the-present/22981027870DC08AF4E01EB06BAB6496.

5. Turner, Graeme, and Michael F. Duckham, *Film as Social Practice*, 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203825198, p. 2.

6. Jack Lule, *Understanding Media and Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2026), https://documents.coastline.edu/Distance%20Learning/Open-Edu-Resources/MCOM%20C100%20Understanding-Media-and-Culture.pdf, 397.

the impact of the process on our existence visible."[7] The narrative is very important as it determines what the audience sees in the film, and therefore what is communicated to them. From studies in narratology, film as a narrative features two important participants: those who see and those who speak, that is, the audience and the actors in the film. Focalization is devised as a crucial technique in ensuring that the activity of narration is not confused with the selection of information presented in the narrative.[8]

Film is a crucial societal resource as it maximizes the societal corpus in its wholeness: persons, nature, history, language, culture, tradition, props, costumes, knowledge, philosophy, spirituality, etc. are all raw materials for storytelling. Amidst the global diversity, the common element in storytelling, as Cardinal Roger Mahony notes, is that each story captures a portion of the truth about what it means to be human.[9] Film depends on society for its formation and ideological formulation, and consumption.

The ideological dimension of the film, buttressing the thought of Graeme Turner, carries a burden of social and cultural meanings.[10] Film interacts with society and its structures and institutions in seeking to portray the vision of the filmmakers as well as that of those whose lives, cultures, identities, aspirations, etc. are creatively presented in film. While literature requires an advanced level of literacy in its

7. Michael Roemer, *Telling Stories: Postmodernism and the Invalidation of Traditional Narrative* (United Kingdom: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), 51.

8. Celestino Deleyto, "Focalisation in Film Narrative," Atlantis 13, no. 1/2 (1991): 159, 161.

9. Roger Mahony, Film Makers, *Film Viewers: Their Challenges and Opportunities* (Los Angeles, 1992), https://fliphtml5.com/kwrs/kspa/basic, 1.

10. Turner and Duckham, *Film as Social Practice*, 109.

audience, films can be easily appreciated by everyone, as they are audio-visual.[11] This is one of the reasons film became the dominant art form of the twentieth century.[12]

Film as selling of a reality

While film is a product of a discerned mix of reality and creativity, countless films present less and less actual reality. This affects the final reception of the film, especially when people and cultures feel underrepresented by the story of the film centered in their cultures. Also, many films have actors who are unfamiliar with the actual grounds of the film's storyline, yet play important roles artistically, often for the financial impact of such films and global audience attraction. Some films portray religious scenes acted out *shabbily* by people who evidently do not practice the faiths in question. With these factors put together, films sell to the world a reality that does not exist in real life, or, nicely put, that does not do justice to the narrative that goes before the film. But still, a film must be considered as a work of (commercial) art, including religious films. Also, an aesthetic approach towards what the film represents should not be too far removed from the moral approach. This, says Peter Malone, is because the merger of the two enables the film to communicate human values and also to draw from the audience a human response.[13]

Graeme Turner says:

> Popular films have a life beyond their theatrical runs or their reruns on television: stars, genres, and key movies become part of our personal and shared culture, our identity. Film is a social practice for its makers and its

11. Guillermo C. de Vega, *Film and Freedom: Movie Censorship in the Philippines* (Manila, 1975), 49.

12. "Film," *Brittanica*, https://www.britannica.com/art/film.

13. Peter Malone, *Film and Faith* (Manila: CFA Media, 2008), 3, 18.

> audience: in its narratives and meanings, we can locate evidence of the ways in which our culture makes sense of itself.[14]

Synthesizing the understanding of film as a narrative and social device and as a selling of reality sets the platform for a contextualized approach towards contemporary films, which participate, just like other films, in such roles in society.

Audience Negotiation of Meaning in Films

For this paper, we will consider these as criteria for classifying films: themes, emotional impact, and narrative style as our criteria for the same. Major genres in film include: action, drama, adventure, comedy, thriller, horror, science fiction, romance, fantasy, crime, and documentary. Philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas opines that any production of knowledge serves a certain interest: instrumental, practical, or emancipatory interest.[15] The same applies to movies. As a marriage of technique and meaning,[16] movies enchant us one day and live within us for many years.[17] There are multiple meanings in what we see in the film, depending on how much we are informed in real life about what is featured in the film. Some meanings are deliberate and consciously intended, but not all are obvious. Ryan and Lenos note that: "Some meanings come from a culture the filmmaker inhabits, and they enter the film without the filmmaker realizing it... Other meanings

14. Turner and Duckham, *Film as Social Practice*, 4.

15. Jurgen Harbemas, *Knowledge and Human Interest* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972).

16. Michael Ryan and Melissa Lenos, *An Introduction to Film Analysis: Technique and Meaning in Narrative Film* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2020), 1.

17. Gaston Roberge, *Films for an Ecology of Mind: Essays on realism in the Cinema* (Calcutta: Firma, 1978), 1.

are shaped by thematic or aesthetic necessity and seem neither entirely unconscious nor entirely deliberate."[18]

Narratives resonate differently across cultures and social groups. For example, a film situated in the Filipino culture will have nuances of the Filipino culture which the Filipinos can immediately perceive, even when they are not directly acted out or verbalized. For example, in the movie *When I Met You in Tokyo* (2023)[19] the two main cast Vilma Santos and Christopher de Leon, manifest a strong sense of '*Utang na loob*.'[20] Filipino viewers have better chances of understanding the context beyond the visual, more deeply, even when it is not put in words or special scenes. This is because it is profoundly rooted in their cultural understanding of the value of gratitude. It is also practically ingrained in their daily social life.

In the same way, different aspects of a film, such as the character's persona, storyline, soundtracks, mood, etc. can strike a note in the hearts and consciousness of Christian believers based on their holistic formation as people of faith. Typical examples here are values of forgiveness, mercy, unconditional love, care, and hope amidst an uncertain future. Stephanie Sellers explains this as 'relatability,' and says: "When people identify with a character on screen in a relatable transitional phase, it opens doors for theological development."[21]

18. Ryan and Lenos, *An Introduction to Film Analysis*, 2, 3.

19. Suzette Doctolero, *When I Met You in Tokyo*, directed by Radu Peru and Rommel Penesa (Philippines: JG Productions, 2023).

20. Literary: "A debt of one's inner self". It entails reciprocity, or an obligation to appropriately repay a person who has done one a favour. Cf. Angelo Gundran, et al., "The Concept of Utang na Loob in The Philippines: Utang na Loob Scale," *Antorcha*, Vol 8, No. 1 & 2, (March 2021): 1. https://ejournals.ph/article.php?id=17184.

21. Stephanie Mullins Sellers, *How the Power of Film Inspires Christianity* (master's thesis, Liberty University, 2022), 17. https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1901&context=masters.

For Gaston Roberge the film is somehow ourselves, and any attempt at penetrating its secrets may help us to perceive our own mystery.[22]

The audience also negotiates the various meanings based on the flow of the storyline and the highlights of the narrative actualized in the film. Also, many films have polysemy (multiple meanings), a device oftentimes intentionally used for advocacy and to deliver a message, and other semantic devices. For a word, for example, there is on one hand, the literal 'physical message', and on the other hand, a message that is a 'meaningful outcome of the encounter between the word and the reader.'[23] While to some viewers a movie appears as mere entertainment, to others it can be a strong critique of society properly. Meaning is not confined to the literal or physical message.

It is 'the visual thrust' as Tim Cawkwell calls it, that distinguishes film from literary narrative, so that framing, movement, and editing are key to understanding the artifice (giving ideas form) of a film.[24] By viewing films (and going to cinemas), one actively practices curious 'meaning-making' as Clive Marsh calls it. The crucial intersection point is the meaning on the side of the audience as they interact with the film, particularly "what films do to their audiences and what audiences do with films." [25] Gaston Roberge would passionately say, "... films

22. Roberge, Films for an Ecology of Mind, 1.

23. Udo P. Ibuot, "Polysemy and Meaning-Making of Media Contents among the Audience," *International Journal of Communication Research* 14, no. 1, (January-March 2024): 6, https://www.ijcr.eu/article/662_005%20Udo%20P%20Ibuot1.pdf.

24. Tim Cawkwell, *The Filmgoer's Guide to God* (London: Darton, Longmann and Todd, 2004), 3.

25. Clive Marsh, "Theology and the Practice of Meaning-Making," *The Expository Times* 119, no. 2 (2007): 69, https://doi.org/10.1177/0014524607084086.

gave so much to us, to which we readily gave hours of our lives otherwise unique, precious, and so brief."[26]

This intersection brings together two important players, the moviegoer (viewer) and the movie producer, who Eddie Infante says, "are intimately related, if not wholly by blood, at the very least, by inclination. They both like films; one delights in making them; the other delights in viewing them. It is like a warm relationship between the cook and the eater!"[27] One brings himself/herself in contact with a reality that will communicate something to him, making oneself vulnerable to being triggered by characters, actions, philosophies, cinematography, and even the plot.

In response to the question: "What do films do to viewers?" Roberge proposed three complementary viewpoints: First, psychological (an imaginary experience of the onlooker), Second, heuristic (film as the art and science of creating a mobile image), and third, treating film as one of the mass media.[28] Reconciling these three perspectives gives a more holistic answer to the puzzle of the impact of films on the viewers.

However, for Gianfranco Bettetini, this 'impact' hangs on another string which he calls the 'interpretive freedom.' He says, "The cinematographic work of art is complete and definitive before being projected, and it only regains an open dimension within the receptive universe of the perceiver, as a

26. Gaston Roberge, *Films for an Ecology of Mind: Essays on realism in the Cinema*, 1.

27. Eddie J. Infante, "Whatever Happened to the Filipino Moviegoer?" in *Inside Philippine Movies 1970-1990: Essays for Students of Philippine Cinema* (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1991), 50.

28. Roberge, *Films for an Ecology of Mind*, 18.

result of his interpretive freedom."[29] But, there are also risks associated with this meaning-making adventure in films, given the irreconcilably varying viewpoints, for example, resulting from the age gap, and interpretive freedom based on learned moral and religious convictions. For example, when watching a movie from a different culture, one will often notice several things that are probably objectionable and unacceptable in one's culture, yet they are normal in another. Film viewers cannot erase all they knew before and engage with a film from a purely similar and neutral perspective.

Films in the Context of Global and Contextual Morals

Moral worldviews play a huge role in meaning-making. This is not a modern discovery. Film content censorship was raised as a concern over a century ago. In 1909, an American theatre critic, Walter Eaton, wrote: "When you reflect that in New York City alone, on a Sunday, 500,000 people go to the moving picture shows, a majority of them perhaps children ... you cannot dismiss canned drama (pre-recorded) with a shrug of contempt. Here is an industry to be controlled, an influence to be reckoned with."[30] Moral concerns like this arise from moral worldviews.

Moral worldviews are deeply rooted in the customs and values of the people and are closely connected with religious perspectives as their booster springboard. As stories are rooted in the life of the community, movies are similarly, in part or in whole, rooted in the life experiences, aspirations, and memories of that society. On this ground, films should

29. Gianfranco Bettetini, *The Language and Technique of the Film*, vol. 28 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG, 2018), 11.

30. James Chapman, *Cinemas of the World: Film and Society from 1895 to the Present* (London: Reaktion Books, 2003), 67.

reflect the moral climate of the society they originate from as they are not independent self-generating realities.

Guillermo C. de Vega expounds that:

> Movies reflect the moral climate of the society, but at the same time they also influence their audience morally. Thus, the relationship can be seen as cyclical, each side interacting with and influencing the other, and viewed in this context, it is not possible to speak of the film as a product conceived in an artistic vacuum, removed from the life of the community.[31]

Despite being for entertainment, the sense of value plays an important role, particularly on the side of the film producers. De Vega calls this the "Artistic conscience," which even before specified legalities, can guide producers to self-censorship, and set boundaries of candor and shame, especially in dealing with most intimate and private confrontation of values such as lovemaking, life and death portrayals, as well as the most public moments in which values clash and are violently or peacefully negotiated.[32] An artistic conscience determines from purely artistic standards what constitutes the valid parts of the film, such that scenes are not, for example, intended for only the display of nudity, arousal of base sexual instincts, or just a careless display of violence, or other vices.[33]

Cardinal Mahony proposes an evaluation of sexuality in motion pictures by raising exploratory questions in three areas: First, what the characters say to each other and if only acted as a source of pleasure and physical release, if the film is

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31. Guillermo C. de Vega, *Film and Freedom: Movie Censorship in the Philippines*, 107-108.

32. Margaret Miles, *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), xv.

33. Guillermo C. de Vega, *Film and Freedom: Movie Censorship in the Philippines*, 101.

honest about the level of inauthenticity, inadequacy, terrible emptiness, and shallowness. Secondly, whether those scenes are exploitative, and what potential effects can they have on younger vs. mature viewers? And thirdly, whether the film conveys the beauty of authentic sexuality, or if it demeans it, and if it caters to the self-indulgent side of its viewers, or if it motivates them to be honest, sensitive, and loving in relating with other people?[34]

Just like a storyline and scenes, characters in films are created, oftentimes carefully. Their authors assign them values, attitudes, and emotions that are actionable and understandable. Paradoxes, inconsistencies, and emotional layers are added to them to make them more unique and the scenes deeper and richer. There are also patterns of attitudes that help deepen and define them, showing how each character looks at life, and how he/she can appeal to possible predictability in the eyes of keen viewers.[35] As these qualities do not exist alone, they are important building blocks of the moral fabric of the film as they determine the interactions among characters when their values and beliefs meet, question, contest, or resist those of another.[36]

Faith Seeking Understanding in Films

Here comes the question: As people of faith, should we question the movies? The answer is 'Yes'! We have the moral task to hold high our moral sense and point an intelligent

34. Roger Mahony, *Film Makers, Film Viewers: Their Challenges and Opportunities*, 12.

35. Linda Seger, *Creating Unforgettable Characters: A Practical Guide to Character Development in Films, TV Series, Advertisements, Novels and Short Stories* (Ontario: Fitzhenry & Whiteside Ltd., 1990), 29-36.

36. Margaret Miles, *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies*, xv.

finger at what is wrong with movies,[37] and to go deeper into questioning the world the movies create. John Pungente and Monty Williams rightly point out that every film proposes to the audience forms of the world and ethical ways of living in the world it creates. When we watch film therefore, we are not just being entertained; we are being formed and shaped.[38]

Across the globe, different countries have civil regulatory bodies for films to protect and safeguard public morals. In the church, some councils help safeguard the faith, especially of our fragile young believers, which is endangered by movies aimed at the contrary. There is a threshold of open-mindedness; a fact that is strongly fought against in the perverted secular circles. Pope Francis once warned about the danger of the ongoing well-planned 'ideological colonization' agendas and manipulation, which aim at advancing divisive ideologies that trample on the values and beliefs of people, uprooting traditions, history, and religious bonds of people, and opening doors to the 'cancel culture'.[39] We ought to be conscious that films can be used as agents for these manipulative agendas.

In addition, we would be concerned with 'aesthetic distancing', a kind of psychological gap, by which the audience is made to be attracted to something in some way, while allowed to remain free to respond to the totality of the situation.[40] This is applied to what is publicly considered 'sin'. An argument

37. Malone, *Film and Faith* (Manila: CFA Media, 2008), 9, 11.

38. Pungente and Williams, *Finding God in the Dark*, 14.

39. Pope Francis, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Members of the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See*, January 9, 2025, *Vatican.va*, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2025/january/documents/20250109-corpo-diplomatico.html (accessed February 11, 2025).

40. Jennifer Lane, "Aesthetic Distance in Film and Theater," *Backstage Magazine*, August 2023. https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/aesthetic-distance-film-theater-76310.

on which this hangs is that the portrayal of vices and 'sins' in the film is not a participation in an actual sinful act, but a representation.

However, it is difficult to contain, predict, or account for the impact of this representation, as viewers are vulnerable to being influenced by what they see as if it were real. Scriptures remind us that the eye is a gateway to the soul (Prov. 30:17). By the fact that such 'representations' damage the nature of human persons, they qualify as wrong and sinful. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, in speaking about sin, mentions the capacity of sin to wound the nature of the human person and to injure human solidarity.[41] A 'representation' of, for example, promiscuity, racism, hatred, revenge, and all other vices in film cannot be taken for granted, as it can be a validation for people who lean towards those vices, eventually leading them to internalize and actualize unpleasant and wrong actions, and also can pervert collective action in the present and the future. Films can be watched many years later and be misinterpreted as representative of the morality of their time.

Richard Leonard highlights that:

> Our concern is not whether a story explores sin, but whether it is glamorized and seen as normal. By glamorized, I mean made to seem not deadly at all, but life-giving. Movies may seem to deny the destruction and alienation of sin, and suggest it brings happiness, popularity, and success. This is a lie, and we need to say so.[42]

41. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Librerie Editrice Vaticana, 1997), no. 1849.

42. Richard Leonard, *Movies that Matter: Reading Film through the Lens of Faith* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2006), xvii.

We need a balanced outlook here, nonetheless, as not every portrayal of wrong in the movies harms our faith. Though films show us who we are, 'when we watch a film, what we feel largely depends on our basic commitment."[43] A certain level of maturity is needed, with a capacity to separate ourselves from the reality we see in film by conscious choice. As our faith is a lived experience, we are not tied to the adolescent-like timidity and proneness to scruples and conformism. Without proper maturity in our emotions and sexuality, we are likely to make wrong sweeping assumptions and can be preoccupied with only a sense of moral 'law' while excluding everything else in that regard.

What we need, as Malone suggests, are sounder attitudes to films as complete works of art, backed by a more personal, Christian approach to the moral principles of living. Positive formation (a re-thinking of attitudes) to aid in discerning the moral worth or worthlessness of each film is important, so that we are not just passive containers. The vulnerability here is for everyone, despite our reactions. Both young and older audiences are vulnerable to being exploited by unscrupulous directors and advertisers.[44] However, young people are at a greater risk as they may not yet be emotionally mature, know too little about delaying gratification or self-discipline, and with a shaky sense of values and self-affirmation. As a result, what might be a tasteful and realistic portrayal of reality for adults can be sensitive to young people, leading to self-destruction and antisocial behaviour.[45] In addition, young people have problems with staying within the margins of responsible use of freedom.

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43. Pungente and Williams, *Finding God in the Dark*, 17.

44. Malone, *Film and Faith*, 12, 13. 15,16, 19.

45. Roger Mahony, *Film Makers, Film Viewers: Their Challenges and Opportunities*, 6.

Theological Foundation of Salvation in Relation to Social Constructs

The Church teaches that salvation is an ongoing process, and is not just a personal reality but a journey of our life and our existence with an indispensable social dimension. In this journey, first, to live in society/community is a requirement of our very nature as God created us; as put in the Catechism, it is not 'an extraneous addition.' Secondly, justice, the pursuit of the common good, and care for the needy are essential in the order of our salvation which, apart from being spiritual, also involves social transformation and healing the wounds and hurts of social sin.[46]

While salvation comes from God alone, the Church, through God's grace, is the Mother of humanity's new birth and is the teacher[47] of our faith. The manifestation of this faith is in both vertical and horizontal dimensions. In the latter, it transforms the individuals, and through them the society, to reflect the love of God nourished by the former, in real life. The Church as one community of faith has the responsibility and mission to guide the social structures towards justice, liberation, freedom from sinful social conditions, and protection of human dignity. We cannot practically pursue the common good successfully without actually questioning and challenging the unjust social structures. [48] Pope John Paul II said, "The redemption of the world – this tremendous mystery of love in which creation is

46. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), nos. 169, 161, 386–389, 408–410, 737, 1879.

47. John Paul II, *Il Rapido Sviluppo: Apostolic Letter* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005), no. 10.

48. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), nos. 169, 181, 1905 – 1917, 2420-2425.

renewed – is, at its deepest root, the fullness of justice in a human heart."[49]

From a Christian glance at daily life, we experience salvation every day both individually and collectively in many ways, to mention a few: in our being favoured, helped, and forgiven, saved from danger, hunger, and desperate situations, in our turning away from sin—from darkness into light—and in becoming more and more faithful, resilient, and Christ-like in our own lives by being kind, loving, and full of joy and hope. There is, according to Peter Knox, a clear relationship between "natural or secular" salvation and "supernatural or theological" salvation, which consists in a life-giving relationship with God.[50] In all these, we see the work and movements of the Holy Spirit, who is also the master of our interior life,[51] where this interplay is first manifested in every person of faith.

Film Stories, Gospel Values, and Dynamics of Social Constructs

Stories of humanity - in its global diversity – are not without tensions, as they are social realities.[52] But they are transformed and healed with hope forever with the revelation of God's eternal plan of salvation manifested in and through His Son, Jesus Christ. While the stories of humanity have been for centuries influenced and transformed by the greater story

49. John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1979), no. 9.

50. Peter Knox, "Salvation in Film in Africa: A Seminar in Contextual Theology," *Hekima Review* 66 (May 2023): 11-31. 23. https://journals.hekima.ac.ke/index.php/journals/article/view/142/89.

51. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1995.

52. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 221. – The four fundamental hermeneutical principles for building a people (222-237) can also apply to films as they mirror a merger of actual societal events and creative ideas of humanity.

of God who loves and saves, told by words and deeds, in the persons of God's people, it is ultimately told in the person of Jesus, resulting in a strong wind of Christian values and witness all over the world which both challenge and heal the wounded structures of the world.

The Christian message is not neutral. This is why Romano Guardini (who was once a teacher of Pope Francis) teaches that, insofar as God's revelation is concerned, Christians must have an attitude towards it.[53] It is contradictory to being Christian to be neutral, or non-aligned. This is why we need to take a position as people of faith regarding what stories of humanity are told, and particularly, what the media communicates to us. In the same line of thought, Pope Francis admonishes that "An authentic faith always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, and to leave this earth somehow better than we found it."[54]

As films are rooted in the stories of human life, many reflect the triumph of the Gospel values of love, faith, justice, fairness, equality, kindness, resilience, etc., even amidst persecution, and the fall of evil even amidst its false and vain glories, victories, and powers. Pungente and Williams, prominent authorities in media literacy and Ignatian Spirituality, respectively, referred to cinema as 'a contemporary church.' In their joint appropriation of film literacy merged with Ignatian Spirituality, they aver that when film interacts with the imaginations of conscious Christian viewers, it sparks a living faith, effects a conversion, and deepens their relationship with God.[55] Regardless of culture, this effect is globally seen in stories that

53. Romano Guardini, *The End of the Modern World* (Wilmington: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1998), 104.

54. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 183.

55. Pungente and Williams, *Finding God in the Dark*, 14, 15.

are genuine to their rootedness in human experiences, even when such stories are imaginary (either in part or in whole), as it is in most films.

It is important to explore the interaction between social constructs, which are a product of human choices, contracts, and practices, and the human-divine relationship, especially in the line of religious assent of faith. Humanity cries every day because of human practices that have global consequences as they undermine the equality and solidarity of all human persons, marginalize the common good, promote injustices, oppression, discrimination, and exclusion, resulting in unending chaos and pain. These perils are at the heart of the social structures of sin, and in all these, there are individual as well as societal (group) players. These are part of the dynamics in the stories that the most unique movies tell!

Movies, when laden with the Gospel values, even when they are not religious, stand as prophetic voices capable of transforming the way human persons negotiate meanings of human stories, especially in a direction that is in favour of the good, which in turn is what God envisioned for the world He created. The direction of the negotiation of meaning is important as it influences the direction of one's actions. This rightly falls into what catholic social ethicists refer to as 'the social message of the Gospel'; in which, as theologian Christina Astorga expounds, the Gospel is not considered a theory but above all else a basis and a motivation/call for action.[56]

In his published seminar, *Salvation in Film in Africa*, Peter Knox highlights that:

> While the films present no theological narrative and do not tell us about how the characters enjoy (or do

56. Christina A. Astorga, *Catholic Moral Theology and Social Ethics: A New Method* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2014), 376-377.

> not) eternity, they do show the hand of God operating in the misfortunes and restored fortunes (in some cases) of the protagonists. Even in details like character developments from selfishness to self-sacrificing, we see the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God (cf. Lk. 17:21).[57]

Movies can also be used to engage the viewers in conversations or dialogue with the Scriptures. Maria Azevedo expounds in her doctoral dissertation how movies can help viewers to dialogue with the Gospels and discover social values and teachings. She highlights among other things, the potential of movies in enabling their audience to identify values, articulate them (as well as questioning whether they are being enforced or downplayed in the message), deep viewing especially from the lens of Gospel parallels, dialogue, reflection and finally action, in view of making a difference;[58] all progressing in that continuum.

Portrayal of Salvation in Film and Christian Response

The majority of films have storylines revolving around salvation, as in being saved in the literal sense of the word, in different ways. It is common to have a hero, often also the protagonist, suffering and almost losing it, only to triumph in the end; hence, a happy resolution of that very story with the triumph of a hero and the good. The tension in the movies is established by contradictions of irreconcilable values and beliefs, which necessitate collisions that need resolution. This is both our concern as well as the concern at the heart of the film industry globally. At the heart of the films' tensions are problems that need a saviour, who, most of the time, is not fully

57. Knox, *Salvation in Film in Africa*, 28.

58. Maria Rosalia Tenorio de Azevedo, *Media Literacy and the Common Good: A Link to Catholic Social Teaching* (PhD diss., Loyola Marymount University, 2016), 129, 245, https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/etd/191.

known from the outset. However, while to us it is a message issue, to the film producer, it is an issue at the heart of the financial concern over the film.

According to Pungente and Williams: "If the media provides us with much of the material we use to build our picture of reality, each of us finds or 'negotiates' meaning according to individual factors: personal needs and anxieties, the pleasures or troubles of the day, racial and sexual attitudes, family and cultural background, moral standpoint, and so on."[59]

Many Christians can relate films with perspectives of faith in which salvation is experienced in the day-to-day life and entails being freed from burdens, problems, helplessness, shame, guilt, pain, brokenness, sicknesses, needs, etc. When these are portrayed in the film, they ignite in Christians that spark of a sense of being Christian, and being an agent of patient and resilient Christian love, whose manifestation is seen in core Christian virtues and fruits and gifts of the Holy Spirit, which are rooted in our Scripture and millennia-old Christian living. To mention among them: faith, hope, love, joy, peace, truth, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, forbearance, forgiveness, and others.

Many feel connected to the characters, which can be the start of a salvation conversation with the film. Cardinal Mahony teaches a method one can use to make the most of this occasion by evaluating what I can call "character – inner self – others relationship." He proposes questions regarding the appearance and nature of characters, our disposition and inner perception, our faith and values, and the reflection of people around us and those close to us in relation to the characters.

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59. Pungente and Williams, *Finding God in the Dark*, 27.

- Are they believable?
- Can I relate to them?
- Can I find an echo of myself in them?
- Am I taken inside the characters in the story?
- Do I get to know what they think, feel, or choose? ...
- Do I feel compassion when they suffer?
- Do I see glimmerings of the divine in the despicable characters?
- Inklings of the demonic in the admirable ones?
- What do these Characters tell me about myself, about the people around me?[60]

In film, Gospel values are often marginalized, yet as they are heroic, they resiliently triumph over the vices of the villains or antagonists: hate, blackmail, betrayal, exploitation, deceit, pseudo-modesty, promiscuity and sexual permissiveness,[61] jealousy, greed, bad secrets, revenge, etc. While it has become the cinema normalcy to have a battle of good and evil, film characters who maintain their faith and hope even in the face of adversity invoke a strong Christian motif among viewers who readily relate to their own lived experiences of struggles, redemption, and holding onto hope, which according to St Paul, '... does not disappoint us' (Rom. 5:5). For Romano Guardini modern Christians live in a world that has forced their cultural values to contradict their faith.[62]

Christopher Deacy highlights that while there are points of convergence in the Christian perspective, we ought to

60. Mahony, *Film Makers, Film Viewers*, 8.

61. Richard Leonard, in *Movies that Matter*: "Sex is treated in film as one of the many recreational options," p. xix.

62. Guardini, *The End of the Modern World*, 105.

recognize the place of subjectivity and the marginal possibility of a consensus regarding the meaning and message of a film, even among viewers who share a similar religious sensibility.[63] Shedding light on points of view, Lloyd Baugh makes an important observation that while faith can be shared, the quality of belief cannot be automatically the same. Using the Gospel-based *Jesus* film as a focus example, he elaborates that while one viewer can be a fundamentalist who holds onto the literal truth of every word of the Gospels, another viewer may have a more enlightened and understanding attitude in belief, recognizing, for example, the complexity of the literary genres and other unmentioned details behind the reality of the Gospels,[64] a reality that has greatly influenced the dynamics of that film.

Faith Challenges in/from Contemporary Filmic Reality

Catholic author Tim Drake remarks in his book *Young and Catholic* that young Catholics are a sign of contradiction in the world, first, by their very existence, and secondly by the very practice of their faith – a faith that is often challenged daily by their peers, their teachers, the secular media (including films), and sometimes their own family. Yet these young people seek a deeper, more meaningful faith - a faith that is lived out not just on Sunday, but in their daily relationships and lives.[65] There is an ongoing quest for meaning.

63. Christopher Deacy, *Faith in Film: Religious Themes in Contemporary Cinema*, 1st ed. (London, Routledge,, 2005), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315255507, 7.

64. Lloyd Baugh, *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Figures in Film* (Wisconsin: Sheed & Ward, 2000), 3-4.

65. Tim Drake, *Young and Catholic: The Face of Tomorrow's Church* (Manchester: Sophia Institute Press, 2004), 7.

Among young Christian film lovers, one of the most important questions asked about films is whether such films promote the values ingrained in our faith. Of course, films are complex, just as actual human stories are! But the secular media, in general, is not in favour of the religious perspective, particularly when it comes to matters of morality and boundaries. Based on studies conducted among Catholic young adults twenty years ago, Tim Drake testified that young Catholics do not seek to reject authority; they rather seek 'authoritative guidelines and meaningful commitment,' as they manifest orthodoxy and a deep love for the Church.[66]

This is true even today. What young people need is to be guided accordingly, especially considering that most teenagers struggle to search and try to find a place to fit in. One way to do that, with regards to our approach as Christians, towards the endless abundance that the media has to offer (most of which for free) is what Robert Johnson calls "Christian discrimination." He suggests that while Christians ought to be selective in what they see, they also ought to make an effort to be knowledgeable of the dangers ahead of every move we make, especially when exploring the unfamiliar in media. He further instills that, 'new eyes are called for as we attempt to see God anew.[67]

It is a challenge to these young, innocent, and religious 'seekers' who are hungry for positive modelling, when for example, evil is presented in a film as good or justifiable, or as the signature character of the film protagonist/hero, or even as the whole atmosphere of the film; or where negative characters do not get converted to be good, or keep doing evil

66. Drake, *Young and Catholic*, 7.

67. Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film Dialogue*, 2nd ed. (Michigan: Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 2006), 22-23.

again and again; or when the movie ends with the triumph of 'a lesser evil', a phenomenon that is becoming more and more prevalent in terms of the economics of movie making, as it captivates the audience, especially for series movies. A typical example of this is a Christian-themed movie, *Conclave* (2024),[68] though officially categorized as a 'political thriller.'

Tom Hoopes, a Catholic author, was amazed at the crowd he saw when he went to watch the movie *Conclave* just after its release, a movie he analytically describes as "artfully deceptive." "It was the fullest I'd seen a movie theatre for years", he says. But he adds: "That so many people are interested in the Church's inner workings is a good thing—but that this movie is the vehicle for their education about it is unfortunate. The movie is bound to confuse the Church."[69] This view is reflected in other reviews, which described it as containing "murky moral values,"[70] "a ridiculous portrayal of Catholic doctrine,"[71] and "simplistic, ignorant, shallow, badly written, poorly researched, half-baked mystery... unwitting comedy."[72]

Hoopes further notes in context the effect of cinematography and artful techniques, which are always at the service of

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68. *Conclave*, directed by Edward Berger (New York: Focus Features, 2024).

69. Tom Hoopes, *Artfully Deceptive: Setting the Record Straight on the Movie 'Conclave'* (Kansas: Benedictine College, November 3, 2024), accessed February 5, 2025, https://media.benedictine.edu/artfully-deceptive-setting-the-record-straight-on-the-movie-conclave.

70. John Mulderig, "Movie Review: 'Conclave,'" *Catholic Review*, October 11, 2024, accessed February 5, 2025, https://catholicreview.org/movie-review-conclave/.

71. Sarah KS, *Conclave: Movie Review*, November 6, 2024, accessed February 5, 2025, https://www.catholic365.com/article/43944/conclave-movie-review.html.

72. Stephano Rebeggiani, *Conclave: Movie Review*, October 22, 2024, accessed February 5, 2025, https://angelusnews.com/arts-culture/conclave-movie-review/.

the ideological goals of a film. "The sets were extremely dark, to telegraph the movie's opinion that the Church's business takes place in shadow. In the movie, it takes an unwelcome intrusion from the real world to open a window, and the film only became brightly lit to make a symbolic point, when religious sisters stream out of the conclave's kitchen, escaping their servile role at last."[73] This shows how high the possibility of viewers being deceived by films is.

Moreover, it is important to note that not every hero in the movie is a Christ figure. The criteria for 'Christ figure', as Charlene Burns writes, should be 'an innocent victim for whose sufferings we are responsible and through whose suffering we are redeemed.'[74] The portrayal of a triumph is not to be taken literally in the eyes of a Christian; what is needed is a holistic expounding of movies, each on its own basis.

There is an avalanche of heavily funded films deliberately themed on an erring end of entertainment, normalizing vices, immorality, self-centredness, materialism, and the endless desire to claim 'naked power', i.e. violence, and limitless control over people and things, without intuition or sensitivity, and taking shortcuts of force.[75] There are countless anti-God and supremacist thoughts, covert blasphemies, and efforts to normalize hopelessness, cruelty, despair, violence and revenge, promiscuity, and contempt for marriage and life. There are suicides, deaths, mass killings, horror, indiscriminate destruction, and politicized and engineered hate propaganda. On another layer, there are occult and dark powers, abuses,

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73. Tom Hoopes, *Artfully Deceptive: Setting the Records Straight on the Movie 'Conclave'.*

74. Christopher Deacy and Gaye Williams Ortiz, *Theology and Film: Challenging the Sacred/Secular Divide* (Blackwell Publishing, Victoria, Australia, 2008), 4-5.

75. Guardini, *The End of the Modern World*, 174, 178, 179.

slavery, bondage, 'end justifies the means' philosophies, and many other non-life-giving themes. These are contemporary dangers, and are contrary to the cherished Christian way of life, in the same way as those inclinations are not accepted as life-giving by Christians in real life. But these are seen in the movies now more than ever.

But even amidst these, God's greatness is not completely hidden from the audience. Jesuits Pungente and Williams suggest that in the very presentation of a movie—with its features such as flashbacks, simultaneity, cross-cutting, reversals, overlays, changes in perspective, tempo, lighting, tone—a sense of multiplicity that allows for an understanding and imagining of a God who is not caught up by the Greek *chronos*, by inevitability and by tragedy but rather allows for variation, change, the carnavalesque, all that seems to some like chaos, is created.[76]

Right actions are needed to guard the light of faith in young believers facing these challenges today. They are the Church of the future. Our shared 'faith and *sensus fidei* are not only anchored in the past; they are also oriented towards the future.'[77] The participation of the faithful and their questions, fears, and doubts matter because those eventually shape the ever-evolving *sensus fidei*. The *sensus fidei* according to Juan Scannone, is "revalued as 'a theological locus' or source of theological knowledge," making the faithful not only the subjects of the theological task, but also the recipients.[78] As the faithful on a mission, we respond by putting on the full armour

76. Pungente and Williams, *Finding God in the Dark*, 16.

77. International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church* (*Vatican*: 2014), no. 69.

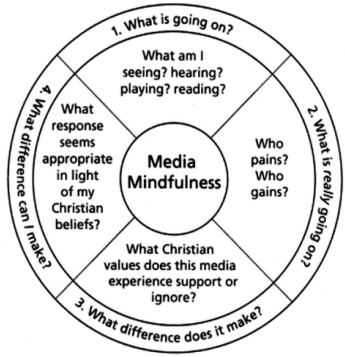
78. Juan Carlos Scannone, *Theology of the People: The Pastoral and Theological Roots of Pope Francis* (New York: Paulist Press, 2021), 108.

of God to stand the schemes of the evil one, as St. Paul teaches (cf. Eph. 6:10-18).

On the practical plane, however, there is a need to invest in media literacy, especially among young people in the Church at local levels, appropriating particularly the synodal approach in protecting ourselves against the common enemy. Pope Francis emphasized in one of his speeches early this year that media literacy education will provide our young people with essential tools for critical thinking as consumers of media, and eventually help promote in them personal growth and active participation in the future of their society.[79] Maria Azevedo refers to this integration of media literacy education into religious education and catechesis 'media mindfulness strategy,' wherein 'learning is looked at beyond the surface and aims at forming a whole individual holistically, especially on the aspect of character, leaving up the faith community to develop in the student a sense of awareness to the needs of others, and a concern of how the choices they make impact the common good.'[80]

79. Pope Francis, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See.*

80. Tenorio de Azevedo, *Media Literacy and the Common Good*, 114-115.



This illustration is adapted from Maria Azevedo's dissertation.[81]

Nonetheless, in the same contemporary *ad-populum* market-oriented movies, when acts of sacrifice and unforeseen and unprecedented larger-than-life goodness are portrayed, especially when involving endangering one's life or saving another's, forgiveness and reconciliation, and a sense of being given a second chance are important, a Christian sense of salvation surfaces again. While there can certainly be generational disagreements on the taste of different elements of the movie, such as the cinematic technicalities, props, and acting styles, the Christian lens unifies believers across generations in the perception of God who is almighty and who saves, even in the oftentimes ambiguous portrayals of human life in film.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that contemporary films are not merely sources of entertainment, but powerful social constructs that shape theological meaning and the moral sense of society. We find in secular films both open and hidden portrayals and nuances of salvation as understood in the light of Christian faith, as films are made in the context of human life, and appeal to real or possible dynamics of human life,

81. Azevedo, *Media Literacy and the Common Good*, 279.

in which 'being saved' is a daily life experience. However, the negotiation of meaning in films presents both opportunities and challenges for young Christian viewers who must navigate the complex socio-cultural setting while remaining rooted in their faith. The delicacy and genuineness of their faith must be complemented with rich, integral/holistic formation, especially through faith-integrated media literacy. With proper formation, Christian viewers will be not only consumers, but will also engage actively in shaping the narratives being told so that there are no compromises of Gospel values and the common good. Future research should further explore how digital storytelling, interactive media, new cinematic forms, and Artificial Intelligence shape theology, religious consciousness, and imagination in an ever-evolving media landscape.

BACCALAUREATE IN SACRED THEOLOGY SYNTHESIS PAPER

DIVINE COMMUNICATION IN THE DIGITAL ERA: A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON AUTHENTIC PRESENCE AND EVANGELIZATION

Septian Marhenanto, S.J.

Introduction

God and humanity have a dynamic process of communication that defines their rather deep relationship. Though it is not clear, believers are trying to reveal the mystery of the divine presence despite all the challenges. From God's side, He is constantly trying to descend and be identified with His people. Indeed, the relationship between God and humans depends on communication. Being a communicator,[1] having worked in this field for many years, and now learning theology as a preparation to become a priest, this study is relevant. This synthesis paper will discuss and expound on the communication of the divine presence and the relevance of authenticity, truthfulness, and community in the digital age.

Faith & Revelation: God and Humanity Communicate

God first desired to be known and share his divine life. As *Dei Verbum* notes, "Revelation is God's self-communication to humanity."[2] He has shown himself and his plan throughout the

1. Before entering the Society of Jesus, the writer was working as a public relations consultant in Jakarta, Indonesia, and is now still actively involved in various communication activities while studying theology at the Loyola School of Theology, Manila, Philippines.

2. *Dei Verbum* 2. Hereafter *DV*.

ages and by various means of communication. His revelation was transmitted through words and deeds, such as burning bushes, signs and natural phenomena, dreams, and visions.[3]

Among the all creation, he chose humankind to communicate his divine plan and to have "intimate communion with himself."[4] *Communicare* meant *"to share with," "to share out," "to make generally accessible,"* or *"to discuss together."*[5] This definition implies that the act of revelation is how the Divine reveals Himself to humanity and invites human beings to be in communion with Him.

Furthermore, faith involves a human response, which is also part of the vital role of communication. Communication can happen and become a relationship only if the receiver receives the message and responds to the sender, since we look at communication through the two-way lens.[6] Interaction and relationships are vital in this context. Faith, in a certain sense, is how humans respond to and interact with the Divine's self-revelation. The quality of the response can be shown in moments of existential difficulties; for instance, when a person holds on to his faith even though they find life challenging because of losing a loved one or facing a terminal illness. Authentic believers would hold that the Divine is always with them.

3. Exodus 3:4-6, Exodus 13:21-22, 1 Samuel 3:1-14.

4. *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* 54

5. Betteke Van Ruler, "Communication Theory: an underrated pillar on which strategic communication rests," *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 12, no. 4 (August 8, 2018): 367–381, https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118x.2018.1452240.

6. Van Ruler, "Communication Theory."

Transmission of Divine Communication

Just as communication happens in everyday life through various channels, transmitting divine revelation requires specific means of communication to share God's love and plan. In the Catholic Church, this transmission occurs through the interrelated channels of Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, guided by the Magisterium. *Dei Verbum* articulates this relationship clearly: "Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God, committed to the Church."[7] This unified deposit ensures the faithful transmission of divine revelation across generations. The document further emphasizes that "Sacred Scripture is the word of God since it is consigned to writing under the inspiration of the divine Spirit,"[8] establishing Scripture's role as a favored channel of divine communication.

Karl Rahner expounds on the understanding of this transmission process by emphasizing that Tradition is more than just a set of teachings passed down through generations. In his *Scripture and Tradition*, Rahner notes that while we often think of Tradition primarily in terms of authoritative teaching, this tends to represent a "curious and not at all self-evident narrowing-down of this notion."[9] Rather, Tradition encompasses the full mystery of how Christian faith and life are transmitted from one generation to the next. This more expansive understanding of Tradition as a comprehensive transmission of faith life helps us appreciate how divine communication works through multiple channels and means.

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7. *DV* 10.

8. *DV* 9.

9. Karl Rahner et al., *Theological Investigations* 6, *Concerning Vatican Council II* (1961), https://openlibrary.org/books/OL22453827M/Theological_investigations.

This understanding becomes more relevant in today's digital era, when access to Scripture and Church teachings is quickly facilitated through various electronic platforms. While digital technology makes religious texts more accessible than ever before, authentic interpretation of them would still require the guiding context of the Church's living tradition and magisterial teaching. The challenge is not merely to transmit information but to facilitate the genuine passing on of faith life, which Rahner identifies as central to Christian tradition. As theology students and individuals interested in the intersection of faith and digital communication, our role in this process is crucial as we help ensure the authenticity of interpretation in the digital age.

The Challenge to Respond to God's Self-Communication

God has revealed His will and divine plan to humanity throughout history. However, many find it more and more challenging to grasp, embrace, and respond to His invitation. In the present digital age, this problem is taking on new dimensions, especially with the rise of the social media era. The social dimension of sin, "the 'polluted atmosphere' projected by the environmental exterior into which we all are born"[10] has become particularly evident in our digital communication era. This social dimension of sin manifests itself in concerning ways through the impact of social media on mental health, interpersonal relationships, and broader societal issues.[11]

10. *Catechism for Filipino Catholics*, no. 377.

11. World Economic Forum highlights mental health risks associated with constant social media usage, such as overload, invasion, and uncertainty. Patricio V. Marquez, "Mental Health and Wellbeing Risks from Rising Digital and Social Media Usage," *PVMarquez*, http://www.pvmarquez.com/socialmediausagementalhealth.

Examples include the proliferation of hate speech, cyber-bullying,[12] the spread of misinformation, and the paradox of increasing loneliness despite more excellent connectivity.[13]

Digital communication tools, while offering unprecedented connectivity, can paradoxically distance people from both their fellow humans and God. A Jesuit priest notably observed this phenomenon at one of the Ateneo High Schools, where many students, during confession, acknowledged excessive time spent in the digital world as a spiritual concern. Many students shared that extended engagement with devices and social media had diminished their motivation for learning, personal interactions with friends, and family relationships. Although digital technology is not the primary cause, it has become a strong temptation that can draw people away from greater purposes in life. We all share this problem, another form of social sin driven by our growing focus on the virtual world instead of more meaningful, face-to-face interactions.

However, creation, including the creation of the digital era, is good, not evil. We have experienced, as Duffy shares, that "the evil is the corruption that occurs within a creation that is already complete and good."[14] Therefore, just as sin has a social dimension, we believe that grace also possesses a social nature in the digital space, as "St. Paul is quite sure about the

12. Linda C. Asher, J.D., "Social Media Impact: How Social Media Sites Affect Society," American Public University, https://www.apu.apus.edu/area-of-study/business- andmanagement/resources/how-social-media-sites-affect-society/.

13. Janna Anderson, "2. The Negatives of Digital Life," *Pew Research Center*, July 3, 2018, https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/07/03/the-negatives-of-digital-life/.

14. Stephen J. Duffy, "Our Hearts of Darkness: Original Sin Revisited," *Theological Studies* 49 (1988): 597–622.

superabundance of grace"[15] that abounds more than all human sin put together. While digital technology poses challenges to spiritual connection, it at the same time offers unique opportunities for experiencing and sharing grace through virtual community building, relationship maintenance, and new forms of spiritual practice.[16]

Bishop Coyne argued that Pope Francis' references to social media in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* emphasize the beneficial aspects of online interaction while highlighting the risks of isolation associated with excessive use of smartphones or computer screens.[17] Another opportunity to consider is that young people can utilize social media in a balanced manner that proactively empowers and elevates often marginalized voices. The key lies in thoughtfully leveraging technology to foster genuine connection and embody grace in both online and offline spheres.

The Trinity as the Perfect Model of Communication

The Incarnate Word

Christ's incarnation is the summit of divine communication, adapting to human comprehension. *Dei Verbum* notes, "it shines forth in Christ, who is himself both the mediator and the sum total of Revelation."[18] This incarnational principle

15. Stephen J. Duffy, *The Dynamics of Grace: Perspectives in Theological Anthropology* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1993), 63.

16. Janna Anderson, "1. The Negatives of Digital Life," *Pew Research Center*, July 3, 2018, https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/07/03/the-negatives-of-digital-life/.

17. Catholic News Service, "Program Explores How Social Media Can Help Young People Engage Their Faith," *Crux*, December 6, 2021, https://cruxnow.com/church-in-the-usa/2021/12/program-explores-how-social-media-can-help-young-people-engage-their-faith.

18. *DV* 2.

offers a vital paradigm for how divine communication might remain authentic while adjusting to many contexts, including our digital age. The Church today must find means to make divine presence felt in digital environments where many young people interact and "live," much as the Word became flesh to express God's presence in a tangible, human form.

In a world where technology and communication methods are constantly evolving, we must learn to share God's mercy and love as Jesus did.[19] The 34th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus mentioned that "Jesus, who himself communicated his Father's message through parables, miracles, and acts of compassion, must be our model."[20] The incarnation moment demonstrates that effective divine communication involves transmitting information and establishing a genuine and authentic presence.

Christ's public ministry exemplified His presence through personal encounters, communal gatherings, and transformative relationships. We can mention some of Christ's encounters that transformed people through His words and deeds, such as the stories of the woman at the well, Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus, the wedding at Cana, and the Sermon on the Mount. This model of communication challenges us to ensure that digital communication facilitates real encounters that touch and transform people's hearts rather than merely disseminating religious content.

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19. Communications Office, "Empowering Jesuits in Communication," *Jesuits*, https://www.jesuits.global/2024/06/06/empowering-jesuits-in-communication/ (accessed January 16, 2025).

20. The Society of Jesus, *The 34th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus* (Rome: The Society of Jesus, 1995), Decree 15, no. 4.

Trinity

The doctrine of the Trinity, which is based on "the oneness of God and the distinction of the divine persons,"[21] gives us a fundamental way to think about genuine relationships and communication in any setting. Within the Trinity, we observe the perfect communication model, where there is an eternal exchange of love, knowledge, and presence among God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This divine pattern offers essential principles for digital communication where God the Father as the Source communicates through self-giving love, God the Son as the Word embodies the message in a form accessible to the recipients, the humankind, and God the Holy Spirit as the Interpreter ensures the message is appropriately received and understood by the recipients.

Karl Barth's interpretation of the Trinity as a communicative relationship, with the Father as speaker, the Son as word, and the Holy Spirit as interpreter, provides valuable insights for digital communication.[22] According to this framework, genuine communication requires a clear source, such as the initiating act of the Father, appropriate message embodiment based on the Son's incarnational example, and appropriate interpretation and reception directed by the role of the Holy Spirit. Reflecting the communal nature of the Trinity mentioned above, we can learn that effective communication should foster connections between persons.

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21. Josef Neuner and Jacques Dupuis, *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church* (Bangalore: ATC Publications, 1982), 98.

22. Yeremia Y. Putra and Yohanes K. Susanta, "Karl Barth's Theology of the Trinity in Conversation With Christian Theology of Religions," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 45, no. 1 (January 24, 2024), https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v45i1.2824.

These Trinitarian ideas thus can direct digital communication practices by stressing the need for actual presence rather than mere transfer of information, incarnational adaptation to different digital environments, and the role of a community in interpreting and living out the message. This theological perspective clarifies how digital communication could be a real extension of divine presence while avoiding the dangers of superficial or alienated contacts. This also compels us to create digital communication strategies that mirror the Trinitarian values of relationship, openness, exchange, and real communion.

Ecclesiology: The Church's Role in Communicating the Good News

The Church plays an essential and continuous role in sharing its teachings. *Dei Verbum* states, "The Church, in her teaching, life, and worship, perpetuates and transmits to every generation all that she herself is, all that she believes."[23] This ongoing sharing process ensures that God's message stays available and relevant to each new generation, even as communication methods change.

Furthermore, the Church's basic kerygmatic purpose gains new relevance in our digital age. The Catechism of the Catholic Church confirms that Christ forms the core of all kerygmatic proclamations and lies at the center of both the universe and history.[24] CCC further underscores that Christ remains the center of all proclamation[25] and that evangelization is the calling of all the faithful.[26] This essential reality guides the Church's approach to its evangelization task in today's digital

23. *DV* 8.

24. *CCC* 426.

25. *CCC* 425.

26. *CCC* 905.

landscape. The universal call to evangelization finds new expression through digital platforms, which offer unprecedented opportunities for sharing the Gospel message.

The Church's duty to convey faith naturally encompasses the digital realm, which requires careful interaction with modern communication platforms.[27] CCC acknowledges that media can contribute to the common good, thereby establishing a theological basis for utilizing digital tools in the context of evangelization.[28] Digital evangelism can benefit significantly from how the apostle Paul adapted his communication method with different audiences.

Considering Paul's interaction with various cultures and settings while preserving the reliability of the Gospel, the modern Church has to efficiently navigate digital environments while maintaining the fundamental truth of the message. Most importantly, it is crucial to maintain the perspective that digital media remains a tool for our ministry rather than a replacement for the sacramental life of the Church. The goal is to use these platforms to guide people of God toward authentic encounters with the Divine Presence while recognizing that virtual interactions complement rather than substitute for physical participation in the Church's sacramental life.

Mary: The Human Model of Divine-Human Communication

Mary's role in the redemption narrative is a "sign of certain hope and comfort for the pilgrim people of God."[29] Her role is an excellent example of how people can genuinely dialogue with God in the digital age. Her reaction to the Annunciation

27. *CCC* 2493.

28. *CCC* 2494.

29. *LG* 68.

and her intimate collaboration on her son's mission reflect fundamental aspects of genuine communication that are still crucial in today's environments.

Mary first shows the ideal human reaction to divine communication through careful listening and deliberate involvement. Her inquiry, "How can this be?"[30] reveals that honest communication entails active dialogue rather than only passive reception. It teaches us how, instead of superficial interaction, we should approach digital communication with great awareness and genuine involvement. Mary's *fiat,* "Let it be done to me according to your word,"[31] also shows how divine communication should result in specific behavior and change. In our digital age, where knowledge often resides in the virtual sphere, Mary's example reminds us that honest communication with the Divine must manifest as actual dedication and transformation. Mary's Magnificat[32] finally shows how proper reception of Divine communication naturally leads to proclamation. She declares God's goodness with humility and honesty, qualities indispensable for effective digital evangelism. According to Mary's experience, honest Gospel communication results from personal experience with the Divine, preventing digital proclamation from becoming only an information exchange.

This Marian communication model offers excellent insight for preserving authenticity in digital communication. It displayed Mary's perfect loving fidelity to God, defined by attentive listening, sincere response, and humble proclamation. Mary reminds us that in the digital era, good evangelism

30. Luke 1:34.

31. Luke 1:38.

32. Luke 1:46-55.

calls for not only technological mastery but also the essential traits of openness, sincerity, and humility she has shown.

Conclusion

The Church has opportunities and challenges in expressing divine presence via digital means as we enter a time when the Beta Generation, born into seamless technological integration, will make up a significant portion of the world population.[33] This reality invites us to apply the theological ideas discussed in this reflection paper: the Trinity model of perfect communion, Christ's incarnational approach to communication, and Mary's example of honest response and proclamation. The digital era calls for a balanced approach that preserves the fundamental features of divine-human communication while appropriating these to contemporary contexts.

From the revelation in the Old Testament to the incarnation of Christ and the missionary adaptability of St. Paul, today's evangelism must genuinely engage with digital spaces while preserving the depth of genuine encounter and authenticity, precisely as God's revelation has always met humanity where they are.

As I finish my theological studies at LST, I discover that the core mission as the true disciples in proclaiming Kerygma, the Good News of the Lord, remains unchanged, which is to communicate God›s presence and love authentically in every age and via every means available while keeping focus on the ultimate goal, which is leading people to experience genuine encounters with the living God in both digital and physical

33. The new generation born this year will become the Beta Generation in 2025 and, by 2035, make up 16% of the global population. Experts predict that this generation will be characterized by technological integration. McCrindle, "Welcome Gen Beta - McCrindle," *McCrindle*, December 19, 2024, https://mccrindle.com.au/article/generation-beta-defined/.

spaces by bringing hope to the world today that is constantly tempted to despair.[34]

34. This sentence is referring to the statement of Fr. Arturo Sosa, S.J., the General of the Society of Jesus, to the Communication Delegates of the conferences that the vital nature of communications can not only spread the word of the ministries of the Society, but also bring hope. Communications Office, "Communications Serving the Mission," *Jesuits*, accessed January 16, 2025, https://www.jesuits.global/2024/06/28/communications-serving-the-mission/.

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