Toward A Filipino Christology

MICHAEL DEMETRIUS H. ASIS
ATENEO DE MANILA UNIVERSITY

Abstract

Current research on the Historical Jesus challenges Filipino Christology to do a "Christology from Below"—emphasizing the struggles and humanity of Jesus in first century Palestine as an appropriate starting point for a meaningful and relevant Filipino Christology today. Are our current Jesus images mere projections of our deep desire to fashion him in our own image? Or are they grounded on real, historical facets of his life? Any re-appropriation of the memory of the Jesus of history must, for the most part, become honest appropriations of the spirit of Jesus' historical life and message, which focused on realizing the Kingdom of God, particularly on behalf of the worlds' poor and marginalized.

Keywords: *Historical Jesus, Christ of Faith, Bayani, Filipino Christology, Christology from Below*

Budhi: A Journal of Ideas and Culture XXII.2 (2018): 1–41.

Is the quest for the historical Jesus theologically necessary and ultimately inevitable for a more timely Filipino Christology?

On the one hand, it is historically mediated, insofar as we understand theology as a systematic reflection on divine revelation. Jesus is not a principle in the abstract. The immediate datum of the so-called Christ of Faith is a real human being who truly lived in a particular place, at a particular time. The event that is the Resurrection happened to a human being who actually died in his own lifetime.

On the other hand, the search for the historical Jesus does not mean viewing his history purely in some objectively detached fashion (this is untenable in the first place), but to experience his history as ongoing. We should do well not to overcome the temporal distance that separates his past from our present, but to see both as essentially constituting a single process. To be sure, we can never be contemporaneous with Jesus' witnesses. But isn't it that the Church, living in all ages, considers all ages as one? That is the very taproot of Christian witness.[1]

Is it our overriding concern, then, to simply recover the apparent meaning of Jesus in his original historical context? If the nature of understanding is not so much of a reconstruction as it is a process of mediating past meaning

[1] Romano Guardini, *Jesus Christus: Meditations* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1959), 82.

into the present, then, the real issue, this writer believes, is to determine both the meaning of Jesus for the people of his time and, more importantly, to uncover his significance for us today. This point is crucial, given the modern mind's propensity for suspicion to any predetermined answers to many ultimate questions of a religious nature.[2]

In an order of reality that is unavoidably symbolic, one can only approach reality as it appears to us. Through the centuries each generation has always grappled with the meaning and significance of Jesus. In each case, a system of images, myths, genres, proper to one's world, has been employed, hoping to allow the "real" Jesus to fully emerge. The symbols we find in our culture are the very vehicles of their deeper meaning[3] as they articulate the very significance of Jesus. The problem arises when one completely identifies

[2] A case in point would be the miracles of Jesus. To determine their exact nature from a purely scientific, empirically objectifiable and verifiable point of view is difficult to ascertain. One should be able to concede, therefore, that the "truth" of the miracles is something beyond, or at least, something more than, the historical. The miracles of Jesus may have happened in exactly the same manner they are described in scripture. But then again, they may have not. Nobody knows. What can be said, however, is that the miracles were central to Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom. Linked and meant to evoke faith, they were, Jesus believed, signs of the Kingdom already breaking into history. Since the Risen Jesus is not simply a figure of the past, but very much and above all a figure of the present, then, the miracles express not only past but also present realities. Hence, they are true, existentially and religiously. Johnson argues a similar point Cf. Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, 145.

[3] See Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection: I," in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde, trans. Denis Savage (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 289–90.

the appearance with the reality, the sign with the signified. In the end, it is just like that—an appropriation.

It is always possible to reconstruct a reasonably adequate picture of Jesus as it is with any other human person. The embodied nature of our human existence necessarily discloses, however partially, something of ourselves. Our bodily existence points to an inner, hidden reality that would otherwise be out of reach. The symbolic mediation of our existence, however, is necessarily ambivalent as any symbol necessarily is. While it can reveal, it can also conceal the full reality of the object sought.[4] Symbolic mediation is at once both *manifestation* and *hiddenness,* in the same way that the humanity of Jesus itself "both manifested and cloaked His divinity."[5] Therefore, while many things can be reasonably reconstructed from the actual life of Jesus, the fullness of who he really is will certainly always elude any attempt at a so-called accurate historical reconstruction. Given the polyvalent nature of all human language, no particular interpretation can completely capture the reality of Jesus, for he remains, in the end, a transcendent "other."[6]

[4] Ibid. Cf. idem, "Existence and Hermeneutics," trans. Kathleen McLaughlin, 12; Idem, "The Hermeneutics of Symbol and Philosophical Reflection," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (May 1962): 191–218.

[5] Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, no. 8, ed. Walter M. Abbot (Boston: American Press, 1965) (Hereafter cited as LG).

[6] Ricoeur uses the term "polysemy" in reference to the intrinsic opacity and richness of language. See Ricoeur, "Editor's Introduction," *The Conflict of Interpretations*, xiv.

To interpret is to acknowledge multiple possibilities of meaning latent in a subject.[7] In interpretation, one proceeds not by simply deciphering the meaning of past symbols. As the New Testament writers demonstrate, the same reality can be expressed in new and different forms without breaking away from the original intent of revelation in Jesus, that is, that he is to be acknowledged as the incarnate divine Son of God.

The Filipino Christ is one such appropriation, which attempts to experience Jesus within the ambit of Filipino culture and experience. The cultic practice of the Easter *salubong*, where the Risen Christ meets his mother may not be historically precise, but the only "real Jesus"—the Jesus that the Filipino can actually encounter meaningfully is one who, out of love and affection, meets his mother ahead of the rest after having been risen. Any other Jesus would have made no sense. Certainly, this practice may reflect the Filipino more than the historical Jesus, for it does express the profound intimacy between Son and mother—a value treasured in Filipino filial culture. And in popular Catholic consciousness, we come to Jesus through Mary (*Ad Iesum per Mariam*) despite Jesus having distanced himself from his mother and blood relatives on a few occasions (Jn. 2:1–4; Lk. 2: 48–50, 8:19–21).

[7] The polyvalent nature of language indicates multiple possibilities of meaning latent in it. See idem, "Existence and Hermeneutics," 13. Cf. idem, "The Problem of Double Meaning," 68–69.

Nathan D. Mitchell says that while "doxology (the language of liturgy and popular piety) is poetry; doctrine is prose."[8] Both are essential Christian expressions, but surely it seems more appropriate for us to enter into the realm of the Sacred "scattering flowers than hurling propositions."[9] The popular renditions of Jesus in Filipino culture obviously appeal to the Filipino emotion—he is cuddled with affection as the Sto. Niño; wept over as the Suffering Black Nazarene. While this sentimentalism may overlook the pressing task of realizing Jesus' central mission of establishing the Kingdom of God, Filipino Catholics can only be so moved by images of Jesus that empathize with their condition. This is certainly not an ideal situation, since it could reflect a rather inward-directed faith that could become self-serving. Jesus becomes acknowledged not for who he is in himself, but for how he appeals to one's life experience. Evangelization today should challenge the Filipino Catholic to appreciate and see beyond Jesus in his public ministry—exorcist, healer, moral teacher, social conscience, prophet.

It is said that today's faithful are "cafeteria Catholics," picking and choosing the food they like while rejecting those that do not suit their tastes. But isn't the history of Christianity shaped time and again by the varied contexts by

[8] Nathan D. Mitchell, "Theological Principles for an Evaluation and Renewal of Popular Piety," in *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy*, ed. Peter C. Phan (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2005), 76.

[9] Ibid.

which the one revelation in Jesus of Nazareth was received and appropriated? This is evident in the way the four canonical gospels were written. Did John choose to highlight the divinity of Jesus more than his humanity? Did Mark focus more on Jesus' mission proclaiming God's Kingdom more than the church? And did Matthew just do the opposite? And did Luke highlight the compassionate Jesus more than anything else?[10]

Truth does not exist in some pure, unalloyed state, disembodied from the existential problematics of history. It is necessarily mediated. To re-appropriate the meaning of Jesus may not necessarily reflect traditional assertions, but may nonetheless mirror a fidelity to the original divine self-disclosure ultimately realized in Jesus of Nazareth.[11]

Our construals of Jesus should take whatever data can be reasonably recovered from Jesus' historical past and not

[10] Mark's Christology focuses on Jesus as the awaited messiah who transcends the world through his suffering, death, and resurrection. This high Christology refutes the common presumption that Mark presents Jesus as merely a teacher of morality. Matthew's Christology focuses on the Jewishness of Jesus, since the evangelist addresses a largely Jewish audience. Throughout the Matthean gospel are found many allusions to Old Testament prophecies and figures (like Isaiah's hope for a messiah and Moses) that are fulfilled in Jesus. Luke's Christology focuses on the earthly Jesus, while Acts, whose author is Luke, focuses on the ascended Christ. The High Christology of John begins not with the birth of Jesus (Matthew and Luke) nor with his public ministry (Mark) but rather at the beginning of time. Christ is a pre-existent being, the Word of God who was with God at the very beginning of time (Jn. 1:1–18).

[11] Roger Haight, *Dynamics of Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 175–79.

push evidence further than it can go.[12] While the categories of one's lived culture should be used to re-express the significance of Jesus, caution should be taken, and critical judgment made, on an expressly phenomenological approach to Jesus. Otherwise, our interpretations may deteriorate into the arbitrary and so disembody Jesus from his own situated history that he loses all his uniqueness as a distinct humanity.[13]

It is precisely the task of a timely Filipino Christology, therefore, to use whatever data is available, and based on that, draw Jesus forward and see how he can be normative not only to any form of appropriation of the Christian Faith in the present, but more importantly, to one's personal "encounter" with and experience of Jesus as a Filipino Catholic. Jesus mediates salvation from God in a history that necessarily has to appropriate that truth, any truth, for any given generation, if Jesus has to have any meaning and

[12] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza seems to yield to this temptation. For instance, she retrieves the often overlooked contributions of women in the early church, which set the bar for historical rigor in feminist theology in *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1984); available from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elisabeth_Sch%C3%BCssler_Fiorenza; accessed October 22, 2017.

[13] According to the fourth ecumenical council of Chalcedon in Asia Minor in 451, there is a permanent union in the one divine person (*hypostasis*) in Jesus, the Word (*Logos*), without confusion, change, division or separation. See McBrien, Catholicism, 1235, 1241. The dolling up of the Sto. Niño into many figures—fisherman, policeman, fireman, and the like, while apparently endearing, seems to trivialize the infant Jesus, turning him into any conjured up figure of our fancy.

definitive significance, at all. We have to approach Christ through expressions that are culturally and personally meaningful for us.

The interpretive task is to see the meaning of the historical Jesus, and his ultimate significance beyond his Jewish past, precisely as the Christ of Faith now (historically) embodied, understood, interiorized, communicated, and proclaimed in history. How does the historical Jesus, then, whose "divinity is the transcendent depths of his humanity,"[14] interact with Filipino Christianity—its popular images, cultic practices, doctrinal persuasions, and ethical choices?

The object of the Faith is always the Risen Christ who, while transcending the human history into which he lived, remains linked to it. Interpretation is always our fragile attempt to unveil, in intelligible language, the "mystery" that is Jesus and allow his significance and truth to emerge more fully.

The historical Jesus and the Christ of Faith, then, are in fact not two separate identities. They are one and the same person. Albert Nolan brings the human Jesus and the divine Christ together in this pointed argument:

> Whatever humanity and divinity may mean in terms of a static philosophy of metaphysical natures, in religious terms for the people who recognize Jesus as their God, the human and the divine have been brought together in such a way

[14] Albert Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity* (New York: Orbis Books, 2011), 168.

> that they now represent one and the same religious value. In this sense Jesus' divinity is not something totally different from his humanity, something we have to add to his humanity; Jesus' divinity is the transcendent depths of his humanity. Jesus was immeasurably more human than other human beings, and that is what we value above all other things when we recognize him as divine, when we acknowledge him as our Lord and our God.[15]

While the piety of the Filipino Catholic typically looks up to a transcendent Christ of Faith, this Christ was born into the world as a vulnerable, homeless infant human being, cared for by a peasant girl who is equally admired for her faith and courage amid the incomprehensible events that had befallen her obscure and quiet life. This carpenter's son grows in wisdom and stature (Lk. 2:52), gifted with a natural brilliance that confounded even the learned men of the law (Lk. 2:4147). There is nothing said about eighteen years of Jesus' life. The first time he appears in public, he is seized by a consuming desire to announce the imminence of God's Reign (Mt. 13:3132),[16] proclaimed with an equal sense of

[15] Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity*, 167–68.

[16] The Jews of Jesus' time believed that the Kingdom or Reign of God meant God's sovereign rule over all creation and history, particularly in Israel's war with its enemies—where Yahweh as King would intervene to guarantee Israel's triumph over all opposition and Yahweh ultimately overcoming all forces of evil in the world. While not rejecting the political implications of

hope (Mt. 13:3132, 44) and foreboding (Mt. 25:1430; Lk. 13:69).

What explains Jesus' single-minded commitment to God's Reign? It could have been any of a number of reasons. He may have personally encountered a case of oppression like the young Moses (Ex. 2:11), or witnessed the great injustice done to the poor,[17] or deeply troubled by the over-all deterioration of Jewish society (Mt. 23:3739; Lk. 13: 3435, 19:4144) and the religious authorities' loss of integrity (Mt. 23:3). Whatever it was, it led him to the incident in the temple, where Jesus challenged the religious authorities' exploitative management of the Temple's fees at the expense of poor pilgrims (Jn. 2:1322; Mt. 21:1213). This is the Jesus of the Gospels. In the words of Elwood and Magdamo:

> [Jesus is] the revolutionary leader of men, who drove merchants from the temple, discredited leaders of the religious establishment, wept over the city of Jerusalem, and died to renew the redemptive struggle in the lives of his followers.[18]

God's kingship, Jesus insisted that the Kingdom was within reach, in one's heart (Mt. 1:15; Lk. 17:21), and that the deepest human hungers and highest human aspirations depend on a profound personal relationship with God. See Elwood and Magdamo, *Christ in Philippine Context*, 95–96, 126.

[17] Exorbitant fees were charged from pilgrims by the temple merchants who were under the protection of the temple priesthood. See Wright, Murphy, and Fitzmyer, "A History of Israel," 75:156–66, 1246–48.

[18] Elwood and Magdamo, *Christ in Philippine Context*, 11–12.

Without a doubt, this Jesus, who inspires both admiration as well as spite for his uncompromising commitment to God's reign over and above the legalistic and ritualistic religiosity of his contemporaries, does not appear to inspire enough emulation among many Catholic Filipinos. In fact, the Filipino Christ does not seem to grow into manhood. The significant events of his life between his birth and death are conveniently passed over in the consciousness and cultic practices of many Filipino Catholics.[19] This is the danger of inculturating the faith without grounding these efforts on the real message and work of the historical Jesus of the Gospels. The wedding between culture and faith effectively results in culture overpowering the faith—Jesus, in the end, becomes rather unrecognizable. Elwood and Magdamo observe that the perennial temptation of the Filipino Catholic is to patronize Christ and not follow him. The Infant Jesus in the Sto. Niño is "patronized through the pent-up sentiments of parental piety; and in the somber activities of Holy Week by emotions of sympathy and tragedy."[20]

[19] See Elwood and Magdamo, *Christ in Philippine Context*, 8–9, 75.

[20] Elwood and Magdamo, *Christ in Philippine Context*, 8–9.Christ is therefore never the object of serious emulation, but of a self-indulgent piety that focuses on either treating Jesus like a child or excessively mourning his suffering and death.

The Suffering Servant[21] is worshiped and adored, not for championing the poor and God's Rule on their behalf, but for simply suffering quietly in the face of persecution and injustice. This may explain the phenomenon of the *martir* (martyr) complex in popular Filipino culture where suffering as a result of abuse or injustice is a prized virtue. Submissive, dutiful wives are beaten and suffer quietly for the so-called "sake of the children"; household help do not complain about the very low wages they receive from their employers; frightened citizens do not raise a voice of protest against police and military atrocities. The list goes on.

Suffering like the meek and defenseless Jesus, who was flogged and humiliated but does not utter a word, is foremost in the consciousness of many pious Filipino Catholics. Plodding through the many adversities that confront their everyday lives—from poverty to violence to natural catastrophes and abusive, greedy and corrupt leaders—the Filipino faithful have always taken after their gentle and docile Lord, resigned to their lot.

[21] A well-known example of this idea appears in Deutero-Isaiah 42, 49, 50 and 52 where the servant becomes an instrument of divine redemption through his suffering and death. In the New Testament, Jesus himself was often identified with this Old Testament image of "the Servant of the Lord" (Mt. 8:17; 12:18–21; Lk. 22:37; Acts 3:13, 26; 4:27, 30). This image in Second Isaiah is clearly evident in 1 Pt. 2:22–25: "He committed no sin . . . He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross . . . by his wounds you have been healed." See Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism*, 3rd ed., rev. and enl. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994; reprint, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 2000), 444.

Jesus will eventually pay the ultimate price of his life—the one great sacrifice for the forgiveness of the world's sins. The universal catechism could not put it more clearly:

> For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous. By his obedience unto death, Jesus accomplished the substitution of the suffering Servant who makes himself an *offering for sin*, when he bore the sin of many, and who shall make many to be accounted righteous, for he shall bear their iniquities. Jesus atoned for our faults and made satisfaction for our sins to the Father.[22]

This is the meaning and significance of Christ's death on the cross. Christ died "to be the expiation for our sins" (1 Jn. 4:10) "in accordance with the scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3), that is, "to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mt. 20:28).

But could the death of Jesus have any other critical and significant religious meaning? Was it a ransom paid to release sinful humanity from the clutches of evil and sin? Does the death of an innocent life, according to a widely held belief in Israel, atone for the sins of the land? On the other hand, is the death of Jesus existentially redemptive insofar as it demonstrates to us all the degree of

[22] ECCCE, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994; reprint, Manila: Word and Life Publications, 1994), no. 615.

commitment necessary toward achieving an authentic humanity? He saves us not by his suffering in itself, the CFC explains, but by his perfect love for the Father and humanity of which his suffering and death demonstrate.[23] That he was executed can be explained in fairly socio-political terms. It was the inevitable end to the kind of battles he waged.

But if Christ's sufferings were the payment for our sins, to whom was the payment made? And why should the payment be exacted in such a violent manner? How can one person be humanity's scapegoat, taking the place of the rest for their sins?[24]

In current western theology, soteriological theories focusing on expiation, satisfaction, and sacrifice have been greatly criticized.[25] Lisa Cahill demonstrates this rather pessimistic theological trend:

> In the view of modern critics, the paradigm of Jesus' death as atoning sacrifice, especially if seen as penal substitution, seems to compromise

[23] See CFC, no. 599.

[24] Benigno P. Beltran, *The Christology of the Inarticulate: An Inquiry into the Filipino Understanding of Jesus the Christ* (Manila: Divine Word Publications, 1987), 96.

[25] Doubtless the most dominant interpretation of Jesus' death since the Middle Ages, this satisfaction theory proposed by Anselm of Canterbury (d. 1109) holds that the order in the universe which was disturbed by sin could only be restored if sufficient satisfaction were offered to God. Only a divine person like Jesus could adequately compensate for the cosmic effects of Adam's sin. And so he who was sinless endured death as a voluntary payment for sin, taking our place and offering a ransom of "satisfaction" to God for the insult of sin. See McBrien, *Catholicism*, 297.

> God's mercy, to make God demand and even engineer innocent suffering, and to make a suffering death the entire purpose of the incarnation. It sets up violence as divinely sanctioned and encourages human beings to imitate or submit to it.[26]

This, in effect, turns God into an object of terror, and calls into question the divine free will, justice, or even reason. Certainly, this atonement paradigm is, to say the least, incompatible with the loving and compassionate God that Jesus faithfully preached. How can such a concept, then, be truly Christian?[27]

In popular Filipino religiosity, however, the circumstances in which these sacrificial imageries are understood are different. The sacrificial and propitiatory language of

[26] Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Quaestio Disputata The Atonement Paradigm: Does It Still Have Explanatory Value?", *Theological Studies* 68 (2007): 419. Walter Kasper, on the other hand, gives a rather positive appraisal of Anselm's satisfaction soteriology. He acknowledges, together with Gisbert Greshake, that Anselm's theory recognizes the place of human freedom in the order of salvation. Human beings are not mere recipients of God's divine goodness (grace) but partners. Jesus represents the whole human race as God's covenant partner in the work of salvation. As representative, Jesus does not replace our responsibility but makes it possible for all of us by "liberating us for the obedience of faith and the service of love" necessary for salvation. See Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, trans. V. Green (London: Burns & Oates/New York: Paulist Press, 1976), 219–21, cited by Robin Ryan, *Jesus & Salvation: Soundings in the Christian Tradition and Contemporary Theology* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2015), 80–81.

[27] Robert J. Daly, "Images of God and the Imitation of God: Problems with Atonement," *Theological Studies* 68 (2001): 41.

scripture and Church catechetical tradition is "still powerful in the Filipino context because it corresponds to the people's religious expectations. It is fundamental to the Filipino religious experience."[28]

However, certain questions relative to a specifically Filipino soteriology can thus be raised: Can the language of sacrifice, expiation, and punishment do justice to the God that Jesus proclaimed in the Gospels? According to popular Filipino religious imagination, redemption was achieved when Christ, who was worthy to make the offering given his divine status, appeased a wrathful God with his death. Jesus, hence, was punished in our place.

Wouldn't this have encouraged a concept of a punitive God that had become the basis of the colonial masters, among others, for the subjugation of the Filipino people? Hasn't this image of a vindictive and cruel God cowed the oppressed to suffer in silence? Does the monstrous view of God who cries out for the blood of the innocent to appease his wrath help the Filipino people overcome their brand of fatalism which consigns everything—including the structural roots of their poverty and oppression—to fate and the divine will?[29] And how does one, therefore, even begin to talk about suffering and salvation, or morality, in the concrete context of widespread poverty and the dehumanizing destitution of many Filipinos, which in many ways constitute a blatant

[28] Beltran, *Christology of the Inarticulate*, 96–97.
[29] Beltran, *Christology*, 97–98.

violation of human dignity, and hence, ultimately of God's will. [30] Prostitutes, thieves, hired assassins—many have compromised their moral convictions, and violated their consciences, because of poverty and destitution. What hope can these people hold on to? Are they damned for all time?

Anselm's satisfaction theory has been criticized for its sole focus on the cross at the expense of Jesus' public ministry and resurrection.[31] Cahill, in fact, argues that cross-centered atonement theories must be balanced off with theories that emphasize recapitulation (the "summing up" of all things in Christ), divinization (sharing in the divine life), the Kingdom of God and resurrection.[32] Notwithstanding the criticisms of current Western theology, a soteriology of the cross has been the dominant view over the centuries. The Eucharist itself, which expresses the essential nature of the Church, is re-enacted with a predominantly sacrificial motif. It is inextricably linked with Jesus' death on the cross.[33] The concept of sacrifice itself is essential to the Christian soteriological tradition. [34] The cross marks the Christian identity.

[30] See Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), *The Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines* (Manila: CBCP Secretariat, 1992), nos. 122–25.

[31] See Gerald O' Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus*, 2nd ed.(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 204–205, cited by Ryan, *Jesus & Salvation*, 80.

[32] Cahill, *The Atonement Paradigm*, 424.

[33] Ryan, *Jesus & Salvation*, xxii.

[34] Ibid.

It is generally regarded that the sacrifice of Jesus merited salvation for all of us—the price he had to "pay" to free us from the eternal damnation of sin and death. But how is this salvation effected? Like most Catholics, the Filipino faithful hold that there is some ontological, metaphysical change that takes place as a result of this so-called "transaction," where the debt of sin incurred is cancelled off as a result of Jesus' self-offering to the Father. This has been taken for granted over the centuries. While it highlights the ultimate objective significance and effect of Jesus' death in the economy of salvation, it does so at the expense of his public ministry and life. Sobrino insists that the cross is "the historical consequence of his life."[35] His death can only be meaningful in relation to his life. And this is what is lost in popular Christian soteriology, especially in the Filipino understanding and appreciation of Jesus' person. The Filipino readily identifies with the suffering Christ, but not with Jesus the moral teacher, prophet and dissident. This is not entirely the fault of the Filipino, given the kind of image of Christ the Filipino inherited from the colonial masters. However, giving due recognition to the Jesus of history and the kind of battles he fought for God's kingdom could afford the Filipino faithful to confront their own moral responsibilities toward society.

[35] Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 202.

Jesus was always consumed by his desire to fulfill the divine will. But what does it mean to say that by going freely to his death Jesus was "fulfilling not his will but the will of his Father" (Lk. 22:42; Mk. 14:36; Mt. 26:42). Citing Leslie Weatherhead, Elwood and Magdamo explain:

> Was it God's intention from the beginning that Jesus should go to the Cross? I think the answer to that question must be No. I don't think Jesus thought that way at the beginning of his ministry. He came with the intention that men should follow him, not kill him. The discipleship of men, not the death of Christ, was the intentional will of God, or, if you like, God's ideal. . . . But when circumstances wrought by men's evil set up such a dilemma that Christ was compelled either to die or to run away, then in those circumstances the Cross was the will of God, but only in those circumstances which were themselves the fruit of evil. In those circumstances any other way was unworthy and impossible, and it was in this sense that our Lord said, "Nevertheless not what I will, but what you will." . . . God achieved his final goal not simply in spite of the Cross but *through* it.[36]

[36] Elwood and Magdamo, *Christ in Philippine Context*, 257.

This certainly addresses the difficulty which has been in the mind of theological specialists and lay people alike—*Did God will the death of Jesus?*

Jesus' initial mission was to reform Judaism, to make it respond more genuinely to the spirit of the covenant with Yahweh beyond the trappings of religious structures. This was, it would appear, the original intention of the Father. Jesus' message, however, was rejected, and with it came the real possibility of an arrest, even execution. Under these circumstances the will of the Father meant Jesus dying for the very same cause he had always uncompromisingly committed his life to. Running away would have been turning away from the (circumstantial) will of God. God's ultimate purpose of redemption was serendipitously achieved not in spite of the cross but through it.[37] The prophetic tradition was never lost in the consciousness of Jesus.

This rather nuanced explanation gives a very credible account of the meaning of God's will in relation to Jesus' death on the cross. God was not just demanding a payoff for the insult of sin incurred by humanity. He was not just asking for a peace offering to assuage His anger for humanity's debauchery. These soteriologies were certainly influenced by the different cultural contexts in which these were

[37] See Ibid., 256–57.

formulated.[38] What, then, would be the most compelling ways by which we, can, as Filipinos speak about the salvation that God brings through Jesus? Francis Schüssler Fiorenza proposes his theology of "emancipatory solidarity," where salvation is achieved through Jesus' double solidarity with God and with a broken and impoverished humanity. The redemptive life and death of Jesus renders at present a solidarity, an "at-oneness," that confronts and emancipates us from sin and alienation, including the systematic frustration of human well-being prevalent in today's social structures.[39] Ryan for his part proposes the model of communion, which he says summarizes the soteriological insights of today's foremost theologians.[40]

[38] Jesus' Jewish disciples interpreted divine salvation in Jesus using "[c]ategories like exodus, covenant, sacrifice, prophecy, messiah, suffering servant, martyrdom, and so forth, [which] influenced both their experience of Jesus and their interpretation of that experience." See Ryan, *Jesus & Salvation*, 48. The Gentiles from the Greco-Roman world, on the other hand, used categories like reconciliation and benefaction.

[39] See Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "Critical Social Theory and Christology," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 30 (1975): 104. See also Fiorenza's "Redemption," in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, and Dermot A. Lane, eds. (Pasay City: St. Paul Publications, 1991), 842.

[40] Citing Abraham Heschel, Christian Eberhart, Bernhard Anderson, Edward Schillebeeckx, Gustavo Gutierrez, John Zizioulas, Timothy Radcliffe, Karl Rahner and Elizabeth Johnson, Ryan asserts that salvation is effected when we achieve communion with God most especially by way of our solidarity with the suffering of those on the margins of society. Jesus came to restore the "possibility of communion" by embracing difference that is grounded in mutual respect and active concern for others, healing the breach that divides the community—demonstrated by his preferential love for the outsiders like the lepers, the tax collector, the sinners. Jesus lived in profound intimacy with God amid the darkness of Gethsemane and the Cross, in

Salvation as "*Bayanihan*"

Central to the Filipino's cherished values, highest aspirations, and identity is the *bayani*—the hero-martyr.[41] The bayani is he or she who completely gives his or her life, and gives it up should the opportune time come, for the *bayan*—the motherland, the people, the community. It is the sacrifice of the "hero-martyr" that creates in people a profound sense of themselves as a nation. From Lapu-Lapu to Gabriela Silang, Rizal to Bonifacio, Edgar Jopson to Benigno Aquino, and the countless other men and women who waged war, and continue to do so, against brutal colonial masters, tyrants, insatiable political leaders, and "split-level" clerics. The ambition and greed of those who hold power have destroyed individual lives and whole communities. The hero-martyr stands as the nation's great symbol for hope and redemption.

The serene picture of men carrying a *bahay kubo* (a hut) is the iconic image of Filipino *bayanihan* (community spirit).

solidarity with humanity "into the very depths of death." The Resurrection is the "victory of communion" over everything that separates us from God. The grace of communion is "the gift of an intimate, life-giving relationship with God and the gift and call of creating ever-stronger communion within the church and among all people." See Ryan, *Jesus & Salvation*, 197–201.

[41] The CFC lists being hero (*bayani*)-oriented as one of the predominant Filipino characteristics. There is deep admiration for heroes who sacrifice everything for a noble cause—God, nation, love. We are patient and tolerant to a fault. However, for all our patience and docility, we will not have our dignity trampled upon. We are prepared to lay down our lives for the weak and defenseless. See CFC, nos. 39, 41.

But these men today could very well carry the lifeless body of a human being as a result of police or military brutality. These men could very well carry placards to protest unfair wages, unjust economic policies, the dislocation of communities to pave the way for "progress"; to protest against the rape of the environment as a result of unbridled commercialism. Bayanihan, in other words, refers to the collective effort of the community to look out for the neighbor and country in need.

Jose Rizal himself was touted as the "Tagalog Christ"—one who renounced violence, but ironically inspired a revolt; one who, while in exile, looked after the welfare of the poor communities he visited; wrote prose and poetry that mocked the duplicity of powerful political figures and abusive clerics, and one who, despite his innocence and his desire to reform his religion, paid the price of his life for the motherland.[42]

Like Jesus, Rizal, however, was more dangerous in death than he was in life. His execution sparked a revolution, and started a long, grueling process toward independence and nationhood. But unlike the Hebrew slaves in the Old Testament, it would take much more than forty years for Filipinos to be "wandering in their own desert" of self-doubt, poverty and destitution, violence and conflict, social injustice and unrest, political instability and clerical

[42] See Austin Coates, *Rizal: Philippine Nationalist and Martyr* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 352, 358, cited by Elwood and Magdamo, *Christ in Philippine Context*, 12.

arrogance and apathy, before they could see the "promised land" of justice, peace, and prosperity.

Jesus' death did not mean an end to this Jewish carpenter-turned-preacher from Nazareth. His death eventually emboldened and animated his small band of poor and uneducated disciples to preserve and perpetuate his memory with the courageous witness of their lives. His Spirit truly inspired a movement which, despite constant persecution over the centuries that followed, moved on to become the dominant religion in the world.

Fiorenza explains that Jesus' "death has to be connected with the emergence of the Christian community as a response to the life of Jesus and to his death."[43] The hero martyred in the name of freedom and liberation, inspires a collective response that will continue to champion the cause of the martyr. The hero's blood becomes the seeds of a people rising above their stupor, emerging with a renewed sense of themselves and their purpose in society, and being reborn with a profound sense of nationhood.

In a homily delivered amid the state-sponsored mass killings in El Salvador in the eighties, Archbishop Romero of El Salvador said boldly, "They may kill me, but I shall one day rise in the people of El Salvador."[44] *Ang pag-aalay ng*

[43] Fiorenza, "Redemption," 849.

[44] Oscar Romero, the fourth Archbishop of San Salvador, was assassinated by the El Salvador government for speaking openly against poverty, social injustice, assassinations, and torture. At his funeral outside the El Salvadoran Cathedral, forty people were murdered. He was beatified by Pope Francis on

buhay ng bayani ay nagbibigay buhay sa bayan. (The hero-martyr gives up his or her life as a life-giving sacrifice for the people.) The irony is not lost, as in many paradoxes Jesus preached over the course of his ministry—"The last shall be first, and the first last" (Mt. 20:16); "Unless a grain of wheat dies, it remains alone. But if it dies does it bear much fruit" (Jn. 12:24); "The greatest among you should be the least" (Mt. 23:11; Lk. 9:48); "One who finds his life will lose it, and one who loses his life for my sake will find it" (Mt. 10:39, 16:25; Mk. 8:35; Lk. 9:24, 17:33; Jn. 12:25). Jesus seemed to have been thinking about his own eventual fateful execution with such thought-provoking exhortations. But this is the key, precisely, to the salvation wrought in Jesus in popular Christian imagination. His self-giving in love "in the anti-godly event of the crucifixion had transformative effects for human history and for creation itself."[45] But are these effects effected metaphysically? Does it make great sense today that salvation can be objectively achieved, from above, as it were? This, to my mind, is an area for great misunderstanding, and a great opportunity for reimagining the way we evangelize in the world.

May 23, 2015 for being a martyr of the faith. See Our Amazing World, available from http://www.ouramazingworld.org, accessed November 26, 2017.

[45] Ryan, *Jesus & Salvation*, 201.

Jesus Images on the Margins
Reappraising Popular Christologies

> Listening to the people's stories leads us to [this] observation. It seems that the choice of a certain image [of Jesus] is not due to the structure of one's social consciousness or psychological make-up. It is less complex than . . . earlier theological attempts to theorize. What made them choose a specific image of Jesus is its palpable presence during a peak experience of God in their lives. It just happened to be there: on their home altars, in their churches, on a prayer book that a friend gave. It was this image that became their source of strength when a family member was sick, when one was challenged to forgive someone who caused deep pain, when one needed guidance on what to do in a complicated situation. One woman with cancer said: "When I wake up at dawn in times of pain, it is this image that comes to mind. It is in my altar. It is this that keeps me going." In other words, at certain peak moments of their lives, these images of Jesus (whether child or adult, dying or laughing, dejected or full of power) mediate God's healing, loving, and liberating presence. If you want a theological

> term, it makes possible one's "experience of the Kingdom."[46]

This is an account in a Focused Group Discussion (FGD) conducted by Daniel Franklin Pilario and Luciminda Baldicimo, in their article "Jesus in PCP II, Jesus of the Margins" in *The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines: Quo Vadis?*, where both invite readers to give a fresh reappraisal of popular piety's images of Jesus. Far from being insufficiently personal (i.e., not focused on an intimate personal relationship with the Triune God, which PCP II observes), the faith of these mostly poor and theologically uneducated Filipinos points to an intense experience of God in moments of terrible tragedy and suffering. Pilario and Baldicimo write, "We can ask what can be more personal than to talk to God and cry one's heart out to him at dawn when the rest of the family is asleep?"[47] Does the official liturgy of the Church "facilitate such a personal encounter?"[48] The popularity of personal devotions do say much about how effective our official liturgical celebrations are.[49] So, when the Baby Symbol in the Sto. Niño stirs up something profoundly deep in the Filipino soul, like attachment to family, or when the Pasyon awakened some

[46] Daniel Franklin Pilarioand Luciminda Baldicimo, "Jesus in PCP II, Jesus of the Margins," in *The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines: Quo Vadis?* (QC: ADMU Press, 2015), 34–35.

[47] Ibid., 35.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Ibid.

lowland Filipinos about their oppressed condition by identifying with the Christ-victim and took up arms against their slave-masters, these popular Jesus images have become wellsprings of life and strength.[50] They are no less "experiences of the Kingdom." And while PCP II acknowledges that the Filipino faith is more focused on "religious images, religious practices, devotions and statues . . . ,"[51] these popular religious rites, PCP II admits, are:

> . . . rich in values. They manifest a thirst for God and enable people to be generous and sacrificing in witnessing to their faith. These practices show a deep awareness of the attributes of God: fatherhood, providence, loving and constant presence. They engender attitudes of patience, the sense of the Cross in daily life, detachment, openness to others, devotion.[52]

This, I think, is what Cornelio means by these practices becoming instruments for the search for authenticity in daily life beyond the normal routes to holiness prescribed by the institutional Church.[53] Cornelio points to the case of El

[50] Adrian Louie Z. Atonducan, "Christ and Social Transformation: The Christological Journey from PCP II to CFC," in *The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines: Quo Vadis*, 56.

[51] PCP II Commission on Religious Concerns, "Final Draft: Religious Concerns" (1991), 5.

[52] See PCP II, no. 172; Cf. Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Pasay City: St. Paul Publications, 1975), no. 80.

[53] A recent study by Jayeel S. Cornelio, PhD. contends that popular expressions of Filipino piety are not necessarily completely inward-looking,

Shaddai, which has been often criticized for promoting a "prosperity gospel" or encouraging "cargo culting"—terms that both suggest that members attend the services simply for the miracles and blessings promised. It turns out these are not mindless people. They have real-life choices as they shape various situations to suit their own needs. They reimagine their suffering and poverty as evils that God, who is more than enough (*siksik, liglig, umaapaw*) will overcome.[54]

Practitioners of popular piety view salvation, then, as "life-giving experiences of the Kingdom." They identify with a very human Jesus. Pilario and Baldicimo write:

> [These experiences] tell us that we need a human God who can deeply understand us because he went through [suffering] itself; one who can feel what we are going through and who can allow us to be ourselves in the midst of our deepest anguish because he knows what it means. We need a God so human that I can shout my pain and hurl my anger at him without being judged or condemned. Of course, that same God can also

incoherent, fanatical or religiously ignorant. These popular expressions demonstrate the "turn to authenticity," defined as the local and personal contexts by which individuals demonstrate their search for personal meaning and transformation as Catholics beyond the prescribed rules and rituals inherent in the structures of institutional Catholicism. See Jayeel S. Cornelio, "Popular Religion and the Turn to Everyday Authenticity: Reflections on the Contemporary Study of Philippine Catholicism," *Philippine Studies Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints* 62, nos. 3–4 (September–December 2014): 481.

[54] Cornelio, "Popular Religion and the Turn to Everyday Authenticity," 483.

> speak back . . . . But this time, it is easier to listen and follow someone who has been in solidarity with me.[55]

Popular religiosity, Cornelio observes, "may be an expression of a deeper mode of being Catholic."[56] He mentions studies on voluntary crucifixion and flagellation as expressions of penance (*penitensiya*), which downplay a sense of sin. Official Church teaching considers penance important in disciplining the body. Various reasons were given for these Lenten practices: to fulfill a vow for some answered prayer, to share in Christ's sufferings, to pray for healing for a family member or for oneself.[57] In the *panata* (religious vow), often the operative value is *utang na loob* or debt of gratitude for an answered prayer for oneself or a relative.[58]

The rather mechanical approach by which Filipino Catholics live their faith created the phenomenon of "nominal Catholicism," where the faithful are Catholics only by name, not by deed. In their sacramental lives, for instance, Catholics have merely become passive "recipients" of grace, believing that sacraments work merely *ex opere operato* (through the work done), that is, any ritual sacrament communicates grace objectively by simply performing it. The Pelagians in the fifth century insisted that salvation is possible through

[55] Pilario and Baldicimo, "Jesus in PCP II, Jesus of the Margins," 37–38.
[56] Cornelio, "Popular Religion and the Turn to Everyday Authenticity," 483.
[57] Ibid., 479.
[58] Ibid., 480.

human effort alone apart from grace. This prompted the great theologian of the West, St. Augustine of Hippo, to all the more affirm that divine grace is capable of anything, such as communicate grace through a ritual sacrament. This becomes obvious in the baptism of infants. Incapable of personal faith due to their obvious condition, infants receive grace nevertheless since God can communicate grace whenever and wherever He wills. This does not necessarily reject the other sacramental principle, that sacraments ultimately work *ex opere operantis* (through the work of the worker), i.e., through the personal faith of the individual, which constitutes the proper disposition required for the sacrament, the grace that is received objectively (*ex opere operato*) becomes effective and fruitful in the life of the individual who performs the sacrament. But it does give the impression that so long as no obstacle, such as serious sin, is placed in the performance of the sacrament, grace is automatically communicated.[59]

So, even without the proper disposition of active personal faith, Filipino Catholics continue to frequent the sacraments. Babies incapable of personal faith are baptized; young schoolchildren are herded to confession, reading from a list

[59] The Council of Trent's teaching on the effectiveness of a sacrament appears to suggest that placing no obstacle simply meant avoiding serious sin. The Council's teaching "was intended to address both adult and infant baptisms in a single formula." See Michael Demetrius H. Asis, *Reimagining the Sacred: A Fresh Approach to Prayer, Liturgy and the Sacraments* (QC: Claretian Publications, 2012), 139.

of sins they memorize, and receive communion without really understanding what they're receiving; young children are confirmed unmindful of what the sacrament really demands of them; couples wed in church believing that a church wedding will guarantee a successful marriage; frantic family members call for a priest for a dying loved one believing that death without the benefit of a priest's blessing will spell eternal damnation; and so forth.

Was salvation automatically achieved? Did the noble sacrifice of one Jewish prophet result in the forgiveness of all sins? Why do many Filipino Catholics continue to struggle with evil in society and in themselves? Why is renewal in the Church still a far-fetched dream despite the reforms initiated by Vatican II, the exhortations of PCP II, even the inspired leadership of a Pope Francis and a Cardinal Luis A. Tagle? Why do Filipino Catholics, despite their inherent piety, seem to fail to build up the Kingdom?[60] This is certainly a serious charge, Pilario and Baldicimo observe.[61]

But while the Filipino faith today is focused on the rites of popular piety, PCP II asserts they cannot be dismissed as mere "nominal Catholics" simply because they fail to attend the official Church services regularly.[62] We have to ask whether much of what the historical Jesus taught about the Kingdom has been made part of their lives. Have they fed the

[60] PCP II, no. 13.
[61] Pilario and Baldicimo, "Jesus in PCP II, Jesus of the Margins," 36.
[62] PCP II, no. 14.

hungry, given a drink to the thirsty, sheltered the homeless (Mt. 25:3146)?[63]

While PCP II recognizes the apparent limitations of popular piety for the most part, it does acknowledge that the values of the Kingdom have become part of the lives of many so-called "nominal Catholics." It writes:

> And so when we see jeepney drivers taking into their homes stranded passengers, dirt-poor farmers sharing food with the more destitute, or lawyers and doctors giving free service to needy clients, we have to think twice about the depth of those we call "nominal Catholics."[64]

Furthermore, many young people believed to be inactive churchgoers continue to be engaged in new forms of spirituality, or more meaningful faith expressions like community outreach activities.[65] Socio-political involvement is another area where Catholic witness is starting to show itself. Basic Christian communities in Bukidnon and Bacolod, for instance, have vigorously campaigned against electoral fraud and violence, and efforts to undermine human rights and peace advocacies.[66] Similar efforts have been taking place in many parishes in Metro Manila. Parish studies conducted by my students from 1990–1996 indicate that most parishes

[63] PCP II, no. 14.
[64] Ibid., no. 15.
[65] Cornelio, "Popular Religion and the Turn to Everyday Authenticity," 484.
[66] Ibid., 485.

respond to the call of Vatican II and PCP II for more socio-political involvement to build up the Kingdom through the Service or Social Apostolate Committee by looking after the needs of the destitute poor, campaigning against environmental neglect and abuse, and taking steps to address the drug menace. Large-scale mining has been opposed in Samar due to largely Catholic efforts. Even lay charismatic communities often seen as inward-looking have addressed the issue of poverty by building self-sustaining communities.[67]

Many Filipino Catholics have not heard of Vatican II, much less PCP II. And yet, if the active participation of many youth in various forms of social outreaches be any indication, then these young people appear to subscribe to what Cornelio calls "golden-rule Catholicism," suggesting that

[67] Cornelio, "Popular Religion," 485. Such is the case for Couples for Christ, whose more socially oriented bloc decided to engage in building homes and communities for the homeless poor through the Gawad Kalinga. The other more conservative bloc decided to remain faithful to its original vision of sustaining the spiritual lives of its members. In a study of these Charismatic covenanted communities called "movements of renewal" by PCP II (no. 610), Emmanuel S. de Guzman notes that while there have been steps to address the issues of poverty and social justice, these are considered the result of individual sin, and not of unjust social structures. Most of these transparochial (faith communities not based in a specific parish locality or ecclesiastical jurisdiction) communities give priority to personal conversion to Christ over and above the social responsibilities demanded by the Gospel. De Guzman concludes his study by suggesting that these communities appear to emerge from a deeply rooted spirituality in reaction to a highly institutionalized and bureaucratic Church. See Emmanuel S. de Guzman, "Philippine Transparochial Communities: Forces of Renewal or Blocs of Resistance in the Church of the Poor," in *The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines: Quo Vadis?*, 82–89.

"right living has become more important than right believing."[68]

These are all, in their own way, heroic acts that invigorate both their circles of relationships and society at large. As I write, another cleric was gunned down in Nueva Ecija. He was Fr. Marcelito "Tito" Paez, a retired seventy-two year old priest who was a known advocate for justice, peace and human rights.[69] The first well-known case involving the murder of a priest was that of Fr. Tulio Favali, an Italian priest of the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions (PIME), who was gunned down by paramilitary forces in North Cotabato in 1984 while he was mediating between these forces and a couple who were accused of aiding and abetting Muslim rebels.[70] Bishop Roberto Mallari of the Diocese of San Jose, Nueva Ecija challenged his priests to give courageous witness to the Gospel, and be ready to stand like Fr. Paez for truth, justice, and the welfare of the voiceless people.[71] Countless others have also poured out their lives in defense of human rights, the protection of the environment, and took up the cause of justice to be on the preferential side of the poor and the oppressed.

Notwithstanding these heartening telltale signs of the Kingdom, Filipino Catholics in general are blind to their faith in relation to its moral demands, especially as far as the

[68] Cornelio, "Popular Religion," 485.
[69] newsinfo.inquirer.net, accessed December 7, 2017.
[70] www.bantayog.org, accessed December 7, 2017.
[71] newsinfo.inquirer.net; Internet; accessed December 7, 2017.

transformation of society and its unjust structures are concerned. [72] Filipinos will go to great lengths imitating Christ's passion but fail to live out his moral example.[73] Pious Catholics praying before the Sto. Niño or the crucified Jesus are the same persons cheating on their taxes, [74] breaking traffic laws, bribing law enforcement officers, engaging in sexual misconduct even as their marital or priestly vows tell them not to, or misappropriating the money of the people, engaging in electoral fraud, or having their political rivals killed as unconscionable, corrupt politicians.[75]

These very intense and personal religious experiences of pious Filipino Catholics notwithstanding, whether Marian, Black Nazarene devotees or charismatic evangelical Christians, Christian commitment today would be deepened considerably by allowing the historical Jesus to challenge the taken for granted presumptions of our inherited faith. In a telling departure from the CCC, which begins its Christology with the Nicene Creed article that Jesus came down from heaven for the salvation of the world,[76] the CFC asserts that "the irreplaceable starting point for knowing Christ is the historical Jesus."[77] Faith in Jesus Christ as divine Son of God,

[72] See Atonducan, "Christ and Social Transformation," 57.

[73] See Ibid.

[74] See Ibid., 87.

[75] Imelda Marcos and Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, it is interesting to note, are pious daily mass goers.

[76] CCC, no. 456.

[77] CFC, no. 475.

savior of the world, should begin with a realistic acknowledgment of Jesus' own life and ministry—his commitment to the reign of God and preferential love for society's poor and downtrodden—and a decision not to set aside the historical reasons for his death.

He is not simply God's presence come down on earth, but more than anything else, the human exemplification of commitment to human welfare and development. This is how salvation begins. His struggles do identify him with the long-suffering Filipinos. But Jesus' courageous stand against persecution (Lk. 22:5253; Jn. 18:3337) challenges the pious Filipino Catholic to always testify to the truth (Jn. 18:37) at whatever cost, even at the cost of one's life. We weep when we see the Jesus who is whipped, flogged, and humiliated for his beliefs. But are we willing to do the same, not only for a few short hours during Holy Week, but for every occasion that calls for our fearless stand against injustice and abuse?

Filipino Christology needs to be inspired by an image of Jesus as moral teacher and prophet who fiercely and fearlessly called to Israel's attention the original and true spirit of the covenant with Yahweh. Jesus not only fought against a minimalistic, legalistic approach to law and morality (Mt. 5:17), but also insisted that our religious rituals do not degenerate into empty displays of piety (Mt. 6:118). Rather, these rituals should become genuine expressions of faith in daily life.

I do not see Filipino piety waning in the next few decades. Devotion to Mary, for instance, will remain entrenched in Filipino Catholic consciousness, not because Mary holds a more special place in the hearts of the faithful than Jesus, but because Jesus has been projected as far too masculine and detached that the mediation of a woman seems necessary.[78] What the historical Jesus can help address is the tendency of the Filipino faithful to be rather mechanistic, much too family-centered, and individualistic in its faith practice. There are hopeful signs certainly in the area of Christian social action, but a vision for structural social change conscienticized by the urgent moral demands of the Gospel needs to move the normally dormant Filipino religious consciousness to be engaged in social involvement.

As to the matter of the Filipinos' deep love and affection for Mary, notwithstanding the critical role she played in salvation history and the special place she occupies in the prayer life of most Filipino Catholics, her distinctive and revered place in the Church needs to be put more in the original context of her actual life. Mary should not be made into some mythical, highly spiritualized figure, disembodied from the concrete circumstances of her life as a young Jewish woman in first century Palestine. Her experience, by her own account (Lk. 1: 2656), of rising above poverty and dislocation points to divine grace intervening on behalf of the *anawim*—

[78] Pilario and Baldicimo, "Jesus in PCP II, Jesus of the Margins," 43.

the poor of the Lord—of whom Mary is the epitome. Elizabeth Shüsssler Fiorenza speaks of a Mary who may today inspire modern movements of liberation.[79] She writes:

> The "dangerous memory" of the young woman and teenage mother Miriam of Nazareth, probably not more than twelve or thirteen years old, pregnant, frightened, and single, who sought help from another woman, can subvert the tales of mariological fantasy and cultural femininity. In the center of the Christian story stands not the lovely "white lady" of artistic and popular imagination, kneeling in adoration before her son. Rather it is the young pregnant woman, living in occupied territory and struggling against victimization and for survival and dignity. It is she who holds out the offer of untold possibilities for a different Christology and theology. . . . .[80]

The Mary of the Gospels, hence, should never be an object of veneration for her submissiveness and indifference in the face of patriarchal abuse and exploitation, but for her bravery and defiance in the face of social indifference and foreign domination.

---

[79] Maunder, "Mary in the New Testament and Apocrypha," 37.

[80] Elizabeth Shüsssler Fiorenza, *Jesus, Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (London: SCM, 1995), 187–89, cited in Maunder, "Mary in the New Testament and Apocrypha," 37.

In the end, Jesus is a manifestation of what seems to be that which can ground the meaning of our existence. But whether he is a reluctant broker or a decisive mediator, a counter-cultural peasant cynic or eschatological prophetic Son of God, one's personal savior or miracle-worker, the Sto. Niño or the Suffering Black Nazarene of Quiapo, the Jesus of history who died a martyr's death fighting for the cause of righteousness challenges not only those who, through the centuries, have grappled with the meaning and significance of his life or "poured out their lives in witness to his message, but people of every generation, including this one."[81]

In the end, a distinctive and renewed Filipino understanding of Jesus has to make more realistic, historical assertions about Jesus' identity and mission beyond the more metaphysical claims that have thus far provided the basis for Filipino religiosity but failed to inspire a more socially compassionate consciousness.

The account of the last judgment in Matthew 25:31-46, where the Son of Man separates the righteous from the unrighteous, gives us a daunting, haunting image. By the kind of life he lived for those most in need we all shall be judged.

[81] Guardini, *Jesus Christus: Meditations*, 126.