



Growing spirituality among Filipinos

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Popular spirituality of the Filipinos – in various structures

1. The starting point

Looking back on the past centuries of the Philippine situation, the influences of Spain and the United States of America have become clear to some extent that the self-awareness of Filipinos is still in the process of being born. Faced with the idea of the West towards colonization and acculturation, things have reached into the ways of disequilibrium. This imbalance, in turn, has induced social change, that is to say, a troubled period of transition from a culturally indigenous way of life to one that has been greatly influenced by the West. This constitutes a widespread cultural phenomenon that has a strong impact on Filipino consciousness.

The country experiences a dilemma. The compass of two colonial regimes points to the importance of national identity. A Filipino may be happy and grateful for his colonial master for such a tremendous contribution to faith and civilization. However, his appreciation for the benefits of western thought, science and technology, notwithstanding, he is driven by nostalgia to revisit the ancestral home of the spirit and to re-discover his real identity. It is in this consequence that begins the long process of painful integration, assimilation, insertion that he finds the cultural equilibrium his national identity.

It is true that reading Philippine history shows that the pre-Spanish society did not possess any national consciousness. Whilst there are certain new things introduced into the indigenous culture, Spanish and American influences did not simply supplant native practices. They were assimilated and transformed them. The indigenous people received these foreign elements and did something to modify them into the native interpretation. The degree and the rate of assimilation varied from place to place and from group to group, but there is no doubt whatsoever about the assimilation taking place. And in this process, the indigenous Malay cultural stratum not only survived the damaging effects of the two acculturation processes, but also benefited from the enriching aspects of these dual cultural contacts.

Here it emerges that it is still in the process of re-discovering the richness of Filipino identity which is culturally conditioned and rooted in time and space. The Filipino, indeed, needs to re-enforce the importance of continuity with his/her own history and culture, gain confidence in expressing his own background, and strive to deepen more his understanding of what it means to be a Filipino.

Within this perspective, the growing awareness of “identity” becomes a commitment to renewal, freedom, and re-construction of the history of the Filipinos.

2. The Mission in the Philippines

There have been far-reaching changes in the Catholic Church in the Philippines since the turn of the century. Christianity was brought to the Philippines by the Spaniards. But while Spain truly had the sincere desire to share with pagan peoples the natural and supernatural benefits of the Christian faith, she also had her eye on economic profit and prestige. With the spiritual aim going hand in hand with the other temporal goals, it was inevitable that ambiguity would surround the evangelization of the Philippines.

The road from Madrid to Asia went via México and Philippines. Manila was founded in 1571; in 1583 the Audiencia Manila was made subject to the viceroy of New Spain (México).

Twenty-four Augustinian Hermits landed on Luzon in 1575 and were followed by the first Franciscans in 1577. Manila was made a see in 1579 and the first bishop, the Dominican Dominic de Salazar, played the major role in evangelizing the natives. Of the twenty friars whom he brought along, eighteen died along the way. Only fifteen of thirty-two Dominicans who sailed from Spain in 1586 reached Manila. Still the upsurge of new missionaries did not stop. Into the beginning of the seventeenth century 450 religious are said to have embarked for the Philippines; these included Jesuits (1581) and Augustinian Recollects (1606). The Franciscan province of St Gregory arose in 1586, the Dominican province of the Holy Rosary in 1592, the Jesuit province in 1606.

From the islanders, who practiced a primitive animism, the evangelists encountered almost no resistance. Only Jolo and Mindanao in the southern island remained a barrier to evangelization. The number of Christians was 400,000 as early as 1585, and it increased to almost 700,000 in 1595 and to more than 2 million in 1620. After more than a half-century the indigenous people had become Christian. The Philippines obtained its own hierarchy in 1595, the sees of Cebu, Nueva Segovia, and Nueva Caceres being suffragans of Manila.

The educational system became widely spread with schools and colleges everywhere. In 1611 the Dominicans established the Colegio de Santo Tomas which became a university in 1645. A direct result of this intensive educational activity was that soon there were native priests, who in the course of time took charge of almost half the parishes.

3. Towards definitions

Efforts to identify a particular meaning within the atmosphere of our religion, has been an on-going concern not only of church order, but of the lay people as well. What is happening now how the church expresses her identity in the specific cultural setting like of Asia is an important source for understanding how the word Catholic is presenting itself to-day.

“Catholic” is a designation that indicates the universality of the Church’s scope; its quest for unity, yet respect for differences; its inclusiveness of peoples and cultures; and its ability to recognize and to respect the values of the reign of God wherever they are found. The term “Catholic” is opposed to insular, parochial, provincial, or sectarian attitudes.

Catholic means universal, in the sense of “according to the totality” or “in keeping with the whole.” The church is catholic in a double sense:

First, the church is catholic because Christ is present in her. “Where there is Christ Jesus, there is the Catholic Church.” In her subsists the fullness of Christ’s body united with its head; this implies that she receives from him “the fullness of the means of salvation” which he has willed: correct and complete confession of faith, full sacramental life, and ordained ministry in apostolic succession. The church was, in this fundamental sense, catholic on the day of Pentecost and will always be so until the day of the Parousia.

Secondly, the Church is catholic because she has been sent out by Christ on a mission to the whole of the human race.

All men and women are called to belong to the People of God. This People, therefore, while remaining one and only one, is to be spread throughout the whole world and to all ages in order that the design of God’s will may be fulfilled: he made human nature one in the beginning and has decreed that all his children who were scattered should be finally gathered together as one . . . The character of universality which adorns the People of God is a gift from the Lord himself whereby the Catholic Church ceaselessly and efficaciously seeks for the return of all humanity and all its goods, under Christ Head in the Unity of his Spirit.

As a welcome departure from Pre-Vatican II, the term spirituality has become a broad, inclusive term that has no longer been isolated to Roman Catholic usage. Rather it focuses now both on the human spirit of believers and non-believers. This however dialogues now with the human sciences especially psychology, sociology, and anthropology. Sandra Schneiders provides a good definition of spirituality:

“Spirituality is the experience of consciously striving to integrate one’s life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives.”

It refers to our on-going effort to bring our lives, and the lives of those we minister to, to wholeness, and integrity within the horizon of God’s love, offered to us in Christ and poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

For us Christians though our primordial concern is God manifested in Jesus Christ and experienced through the gift of the Pentecost and within the *sitz ‘im leben* of the Church. We seek to interpret our individual and collective human experience as centred in Jesus Christ, guided by the Holy Spirit, and orientated to God. It is incarnational and trinitarian. It concerns how we live our life in our concrete historical situation, how we are aware of and respond to God and how we transcend ourselves to relate more deeply with others and with our world.

Our religious traditions relate a variety of religious spirituality. But deep within each of us radiates the kind of spirituality that is ours because we are human beings. These include images, symbols, stories, metaphors, allegories, and rituals through which we encounter God in our own cultural context.

4. Towards Catholic Spirituality from the Filipino Eyes

As part of a distinct faith tradition, we bring a peculiar tone to the genuine pressure we call spirituality. We are different people, with very different historical backgrounds. Our Catholic identity and spirituality are, virtually, shaped by culture which has broader application in our contemporary key principles in various contexts.

A much more profound notion of spirituality has been espoused by the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences. At their first plenary assembly (Taipei, 1974) they called for a threefold dialogue – with cultures, with religious and with the poor. This is really a way of explaining three aspects of a single dialogue, since most Asian people are poor (despite, and partly because of, the recent much publicized economic boom in several Asian countries).

Amongst the few things known as characteristics of Filipinos are their being festive and family oriented. They are drawn to nourish many forms and variations of life through relationships. They link themselves with the celebrations and the wealth that relationships and their experiences have to offer them. Too often, they celebrate every significant moment of their life such as birthdays, anniversaries, feasts of their saints particularly in the rural areas where families strive their best to prepare something for their friends and family relations. There is always a festive mood especially when the time comes to celebrate their favourite saints such as Santo Niño (Infant Jesus) on the third Sunday of January, the Blessed Mother in most months particularly in May. They consider these occasions as opportunities for developing those habits of the heart and mind intrinsic to deeper relationships and traditional shared belongingness. They ensure the ethical treatment of those who are part of their invited guests. They prepare the food. They pray, sing, light the candles or make promises. Their prayerful experiences through the very act of sharing in the meals or religious practices bring them into this context with a real hope that they will get some help or protection.

In many houses of the Filipinos, there are small altars usually adorned with images of their favourite saints. The images of Sto Niño or Black Nazarene are the popular ones which are not just found in houses but also in many business establishments, cars, buses, jeepneys and even in sex trade places.

This is some kind of personalism amongst Filipinos which also extends to how they relate with the images of the saints. They generously walk alongside bringing the spirit of their saints in their families who must perform a particular role like a source of protection for the whole family. They also provide new clothes or set of gems for these images whenever their petitions are granted.

The Filipinos are in a continuing search for religious meanings. They long for the religious revelries that bring together their families, friends and relatives. They are in search for religious expressions that will touch their cultural fabric which is mainly family centred and not just church centred. Their novenas, fiestas, nine (9) consecutive dawn masses before Christmas just like the Mexican Posada (traditional holiday journey), who like the holy family on Christmas Eve, walks from door to door seeking lodging for the night in nine (9) consecutive days or the Colombian novena masses too. Then, groups of Christmas singers would come round to different houses to carol the families. Holy services like the Seven Last Words, flagellation, 'moriones' (re-enactment of the passion of Christ on the streets), singing of the passion narratives are slowly being brought by migrant Filipinos to other countries of immigration in order to fill that gap of their search for religious meaning.

For Filipinos, however, the church is considered as a sanctuary, a sense of rooted-ness, a place of refuge, a yearning. It speaks so much to the heart of things, to the innermost core of one's life and it touches them so deeply. They go to churches to experience a vivid taste of what it means to worship God, to dialogue with God about their problems. Some of them are like walking wounds in need of spiritual stitching. In the Philippines, the people have associated particular churches with their specific needs and devotions like the Mother of Perpetual Succour which is enshrined in Baclaran, Metro Manila, St Jude (Manila), Blessed Sacrament Church (Manila), and the Black Nazarene and the Child Jesus in Quiapo, Manila. People go to these places with great devotions and with hope that their prayers would be granted.

5. Conclusion

Having seen certain aspects of spirituality from the Filipino context, an understanding of Church involvements may grow. The Church, which is itself a culture, must be open and prepared to change and ameliorate new insights into how the gospel values are to be preached in our lived-experience. This is with reference to the continuous dialogue of cultures and the incarnation of the message of Christ in a particular cultural milieu like. Although there are some dissonances in looking at realities expressed through our cultural orientations and values, but these are also opportunities for us to establish links and enrich our commitment to collective effort as a basic component of our well-participated creative liturgies in particular.

In our journey as members of the community, it is our task though to articulate and foster both in public and private, in parishes even in conversations, a spirituality that involves integration. Developing our community of faith demands an on-going transformation of our awareness, understanding, and ability to perceive and interpret reality.

We need to articulate a praxis that can contribute to new theological and pastoral horizons from which contemporary pastoral care draws for inspiration. Our vision of liturgy and sacrament and the call to holiness in the world must inspire and strengthen our people to live out their evangelical commitment. We need to listen to their faith experience more closely and with a more open mind. It is through this manner that we make a difference in their lives but this requires conversion of heart and mind to Jesus Christ.

From a Third World reading embedded within the spirituality of Liberation by John Sobrino
– my reflection

It is true that the concept of spirituality is broad and it encompasses different meanings according to the context and people's positions. It is not something autonomous on the part of the subject and it stands in relationship with concrete realities.

It is a journey according to the Spirit of Christ living according to the principle of dynamism and life which is love. These are peoples and communities who are the primary subjects of spirituality.

According to Sobrino, spirituality means living in history – building and suffering that history according to the Spirit of God in our midst. Spirituality in the concrete is simply the actualisation of faith, hope and charity. In addition to that, he says that 'without spirit, practice degenerates.' Without practice, spirit remains vague, undifferentiated, even alienated. He argues that the only authentic Christian practice is the following of Jesus in one's own history, and that discipleship must be lived in the spirit of Jesus, in the heart and soul as well as word and deed.

I would like to draw a closely woven piece of parallelism regarding exodus from Egypt led by Moses as a classic example. Moses himself was granted an astonishing experience of God on Mt. Horeb. There he beheld a bush that burned without being consumed. And he said to himself, "I shall go and see this strange apparition." He would have liked to loll in this mystical experience, to tarry in it. But the Lord wrestled him from it and imposed upon him the task of a mission: "Come no nearer . . . Rather, go! I send you to Pharaoh. Lead my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt . . . I am with you. I have sent you" (Exodus 3). No clearer expression of the intrinsic connection between vocation and mission, between call and sending, between spirituality and politics, could be wished for. But that is the wellspring of idea that sprouts from it.

Basically, it is emphasized in this book that spirituality and politics go together. And it is the task of the former to enlighten the latter as to its ultimate meaning, motivate it, and engage it in the authentic welfare of human beings.

Jesus is seen as someone "right up close" to the reality of his time, and to the major fact of that reality – the poor, oppressed, the impoverished. The poor whose lives are threatened constitute the majority of humanity – entire peoples being crucified, slowly or violently.

It is asserted however, that the most important task on the face of the earth is the struggle for the rights of others and of those others who are God's privileged persons and peoples, the poor of this world.

Jesus, the Liberator is understood as a Christ of living experience (the personal experience of the following of Jesus). As a matter of fact, Jesus devoted himself to the humanizing of human beings – how to become authentic human by and large. His point of departure was the 'pauper vivens' - the living indigent and the life that he offered flowed from this starting point of all other human beings as well (in the case of oppressors, by calling them to conversion), and to all – including the poor. That there indeed be life is

what underlies the practice of liberation. This is why there can be an authentic spirituality of liberation.

Drawn from the author's *sitz 'im leben* in Latin America, it is said that liberation has been historicized and biblicalized if I am not mistaken – understood as a phenomenon of history and grasped spontaneously as good, just and necessary for the poor of Latin America. It is the new spirituality that springs forth in the context of the struggle for liberation in view of love and justice, and this context of the struggle for liberation shapes the spirituality of everyone else regardless of colour or creed.

He cited five concrete traits of spirituality in terms of freedom to love which I think have greater meanings in my own Filipino spirituality of liberation. This however includes conversion, climate of efficacy, victory over suffering, precondition of commitment to the poor and community. These are of course necessary for Christian social action. This does not mean for instance in my own Filipino Christian's interior life or prayer, my sacramental life, my participation in the liturgy of the Church, as mere instruments for action on behalf of justice and for the transformation of Philippines society. I believe prayer and fasting are not mere means to social protest; prayer inspires social action and action in turn deepens and orients one's prayer. I see the challenge here on how to integrate in our daily life, spirituality, liturgy and action for justice.

Personally, I think the readiness to give one's own life, and give one's life, for love, is a central element in Christian spirituality. Like those spiritual giants in or church, they too had done it. Thus, following Jesus is what spirituality means and Sobrino keeps stressing this that the spirituality emerging from a discipleship of Jesus in service to the reign of God for the benefit of the poor is a spirituality in the deepest sense of the word. Its theological aspect is the real, concrete way in which the transcendence of Christ is accepted in ACTU by Christians of Latin America.

Furthermore, Sobrino's orientation of one's own life is always to toward the poor of this world, and partly I agree with him. It is precisely the otherness of the poor that makes it possible to experience the meaning of life itself as emerging from something – other, and thereby to experience that meaning as something gratuitous.

Going into the details, I keep asking myself and even my companions who are asked to make an option for the poor because Sobrino himself keeps repeating this word in his entire book. I think everybody since it is part of the universal call of the Christian faith, which is addressed to all people. To make an option for the poor is not to opt for poverty but to opt for people. They are the primordial subject of our concern. It is to commit oneself to acting and living in a way that respects people, especially those who are not treated with respect in our society. It is to proclaim by one's actions that people are more important than the systems that deprive them of their basic rights – the right to eat, the right to work, the right to participate in decision-making, the right to work, the right to worship according to their conscience, and even the right to life itself. It is life-oriented I would say. This is I believe is the Spirituality today that must be Christian, incarnational, that is God in flesh, and the flesh instrumentalised by God. Sobrino himself articulates this similarly in the nitty-gritty of one's wholeness. In my case, as a Filipino, it must be Filipino in the Philippines, that is, the word alive to Filipinos, given expression to by Filipinos, purifying and perfecting

Filipino cultural and social values.

On the one hand, I have noticed that Sobrino keeps quoting also some words of the late Archbishop Romero of El Salvador. That person has inspired him a lot. He said that political holiness is historically necessary today for the poor to receive the good news and for history to move toward the coming of God's kingdom. He said that we need the spirit of Jesus in political action too and in those areas that have most to do with politics. We need purity of heart to see the truth of things, to analyze successes and failures in struggles and plans for liberation, to keep as a criterion for action what will most benefit the poor majorities, to overcome the temptation to dogmatism, to which it is so easy to succumb in all political activity.

I strongly agree with Sobrino that in order to live a Christian political life, it is not enough to be theoretically clear about its possibility and legitimacy. As Christians, we ought to practice and create specifically Christian values in a n outstanding manner. Thus politics today offers a dimension for holiness and this makes political action more humanizing for those engaged in it and for the political project in which they are engaged.

However, I am a bit uneasy to remain passive about his strong statements that assault the European churches. My feeling is that he is confident enough to canonize the virtue of liberation spirituality in all aspects that is geared towards the assimilation of every individual Christian particularly in Latin America.

He said that the European churches must open their ears, their heart and their mind to other voices, other experiences, other theologies, other committed engagements, other martyrdom, just as the Latin American must be open to receive whatever of the evangelical that Europe has to offer. He aired also that European churches must have an act of humility, that they are not purely and simply the centre of the faith. His indifference to them can be tantamount to his considerable attempts of injecting the Latin American models of spirituality and evangelical tasks on the European churches as universal and paradigmatic. I see his point of expressing the radical demand of Jesus, the Liberator in the experiences of humanity as something great but I understand two different life situations between the rich and the poor and the liberation process to which they are committed. Both have their own way to articulate their commitment to the poor and oppressed and this is basically not as simple as it might sound. Like for example, although many members in the religious communities have expressed their commitment to such a liberation spirituality, we still find a pretty good number amongst the faithful, in general, and amongst priests and religious in particular, oppose such an option strongly be it silently or in an outspoken way. It is the reality now which I see even in our own community wherein we are still decisive in terms of the actualization of our commitments to the poor.

However, I personally subscribe to Sobrino's critical assessments in view of ecclesial commitments and priorities but somehow I also understand the situation of the churches in Europe whereby the communal expressions of priorities and services rendered are concomitant to the *sitz 'im leben* of the people. He is profoundly conditioned by the miserable realities in his own country and other third world countries as well. Fine! I think it is reasonable enough to be fair in dealing with certain arguments in regard to church

composition, etc. without pointing the finger of allegation or denunciation to other churches in the First World particularly in Europe. It is but important also to exercise the string of prudence, consideration and comprehension although I know that Rome has been so careful and even conservative about the issues on theology of liberation but this is expected since this is just to protect the moral, theological, social teachings of the Church. I know for one reason or another that European churches are beginning now to open their doors to listen to dialogue with other cultures, understand other peoples' struggles for justice and liberation. It only takes some time to have accomplished well what Latin American churches have been proposing to happen as the standard of values in the ecclesial journey of the people over the sufferings and injustices around the world.

I am convinced therefore that through time and space, in the life of the church, there is a continuous struggle for hope, justice and liberation.

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