

Holy Week practices, rituals that never go out of style

Moviegoer

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A scene from 'The Passion of the Christ'

MANILA, Philippines -- Holy Week tragedy: Three weeks before the country paused to mark another Holy Week, a bus full of religious pilgrims lost its breaks and rammed into a tree as it is made its descent along Marcos Highway in Pugo, La Union in 2010.

The tourists, travelling all the way to Sta. Rosa, Laguna, had just been through a series of church visitations, more popularly known as *visita iglesia*. They had chosen Baguio, known for its cool climate, convents and scenic views, as their religious destination.

Twelve pilgrims of varying ages, a good number of them woman senior citizens, died in that accident.

Stations of the cross: The incident calls to mind a warning frequently being announced in churches near and far about the proper time and manner of conducting the *visita iglesia* and for that matter, the Stations of the Cross.

At the Saint Paul parish in Laging Handa, Quezon City, Fr. Rudy Magbata constantly reminds mass-goers that the proper time to hold the *visita iglesia* and the Stations of the Cross is not on Maundy Thursday but not on the other days of Holy Week.

Filipinos have long ago grown accustomed to going on mass visits to at least seven churches each and every Maundy Thursday as if by religious tradition.

On Maundy Thursday, Catholic churches throughout the land bring out the Blessed Sacrament in the Altar of Repose for laymen to view and ponder. It is a time of great silence and contemplation, says Fr. Rudy. Not a time to be spent hopping from one of the 14 stations to the next or scurrying from one church to another like ants running around in circles.

Fr. Rudy says the common practice among Catholics who do the Stations of the Cross on Maundy Thursday can best be done on the other days of Holy Week, such as Good Friday.

Another practice among Catholics is the distribution of the 14 stations of the Cross equally among seven or more churches.

Visita Iglesia: The visita iglesia is a Filipino tradition that is not really a part of church law, states Fr. Gau Sustento, parish priest of Immaculate Heart of Mary in Maysilo, Malabon City.

It simply grew from a customary practice into a tradition, which has become richer and fuller through the years with embellishments here and there.

In some places, people would embark on long hauls, from Laguna to La Union, as in the case of those unfortunate pilgrims from Sta. Rosa. Others plan their visita iglesia by towns or entire provinces.

In an attempt to break monotony, many would step out of their comfort zones, their own parishes, to use the time bonding with friends and relatives as they purportedly visit churches near and far.

Shopping and worshipping: Those who live around Metro Manila usually prefer doing the rounds of churches in Laguna and Rizal, and even as far as Batangas, in search of the most authentic Gothic or Spanish churches.

Between stops, they shop for pasalubongs – panocha in Rosario, Batangas, slippers in Liliw, Laguna, espasol in Mabitac, also in Laguna, anahaw fans and summer hats in Antipolo.

Fr. Gau says the visita iglesia has assumed the personality of an extended field trip with no meaning whatsoever, especially among today's young people. People just run to and fro, as if they were on a picnic, with food and drinks in a cooler at the backs of their cars.

In their haste, they miss out on the one important activity of the day, the scene in the late afternoon of Maundy Thursday wherein Christ washes the feet of the 12 apostles.

Maundy Thursday, says Fr. Gau, is best spent praying or sitting quietly in church before the Blessed Sacrament. It is a time to pay homage to the Repository, one of a few times it is exposed to the public.

Family outing: I have my own confession to make.

Every year, for many Maundy Thursdays now, it has been a tradition in our family to go on a visita iglesia.

We set out in three or four vehicles, cramming each car or van with assorted family members except the dog, including children. We plan our trip according to the location of at least seven churches.

Starting out from Rosario town in Batangas, we journey through the Spanish churches of Ibaan and San Jose. Next stops are the smaller chapels of St. Benedict and Pinag-tungulan in Lipa, the imposing San Sebastian Basilica within the city and the serene Carmel convent off the city proper.

Doing the visita iglesia with family members is like going on an excursion, a way to bond and close ranks with. It is also a perfect way to expose the younger ones in the family to traditions that we feel must be preserved and continued through the next generations.

And so, as we drive from one church for chapel or shrine to another, we say a little prayer here and there. We launch the first two stations of the cross at the St. James Church in Ibaan, and then pray the rest of the stations in the succeeding churches.

Between stations, we share stories, food, drinks, remembrances. It wasn't this way before, when Holy Week celebrations were almost always solemn and serious.

Children, in my time, which was a long time ago, were not allowed to talk while TV and radio stations went off the air from Maundy Thursday to Black Saturday.

Times may have changed drastically with modern technology and all that, but they can't change what's inherent in one's heart. They can't alter one's faith, the desire to be one with Jesus Christ in His sufferings with the coming and going of each Holy Week.

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