Developments and Challenges in the Use and Interpretation of Scripture in the Study and Teaching of Christian Moral Life

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Abstract: This paper deals with three different stages/periods in the progressively evolving use and interpretation of the Judeo-Christian Scripture in moral theology. The first stage refers to some moral theologians' gradual move away from the rigid and juridical nature of the manuals-based moral theology toward an emphasis on the grounding of the Christian moral life in the person of Jesus. The second stage shows the need to adopt various Biblical interpretative approaches because making Jesus as the norm and source of inspiration in doing moral theology necessitates a better approach to the study of Scripture. In making the meaning of Scriptural accounts relevant to the changing context of people, moral theologians further moved to the third stage wherein human experience, through various secular disciplines, is paid a better respect for its autonomy and taken to serve scriptural interpretations for today. Thus, theologians also gained better theological insights with their use of the secular sciences to critically understand various moral issues including those that were historically non-existent in the Scripture. Such developments thereby brought valuable challenges to the ways the Christian moral life is taught in religious education courses.

Keywords: Christian moral life • Interpretation of Scripture • Human experience • Renewal in moral theology • Religious education

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Introduction

Before Vatican II, the manuals or textbooks used in moral theology were the authoritative sources in understanding the Catholic Christian moral life. These manuals were designed to prepare seminarians for the penitents' confessions. These were also used as bases in the teaching of Christian moral life.[1] The use of the manuals made moral theology uninspiring and apparently ineffective because it transformed the Christian moral life into a rule-based practice which focused on the evaluation of sin and application of moral laws.[2] The practice became very rigid and departed from a moral life understood as an imitation of the life of Jesus. It eventually led toward calls for change and renewal to address this juridical way of moral instruction.[3]

The renewal in moral theology characterized a way of teaching the Christian moral life that is more inspiring and effective through the use and study of Scripture. Vatican II's *Optatam Totius* (Decree on Priestly Formation), insists that moral theology's "scientific exposition, [must be] nourished more on the teaching of the Bible."[4] The careful study of human actions and decisions in moral theology must be grounded richly in the study of

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[1] See Todd A. Salzman, *What Are They Saying About Catholic Ethical Method?* (New York: Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2003), 3.

[2] See Vitaliano R. Gorospe, "Moral Theology After Vatican II," *Philippine Studies* vol. 15/3 (July 1967): 439.

[3] See, James Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century: From Confessing Sins to Liberating Consciences (*New York: Continuum, 2010); John Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology: A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition* (London: Clarendon, 1987).

[4] Austin Flannery, ed., "Decree on the Training of Priests: *Optatam Totius*," in *The Basic Sixteen Documents Vatican II Constitutions Decrees Declarations,* para. 16 (Dublin, Ireland: Dominican Publications, 1996).

the written word of God. This is because as the soul of sacred theology, the Scripture provides the specific Christian character of moral theology and it is also the primary source which can shed light on the calling of the faithful in Christ to bear fruit in charity for the life of the world.[5]

Over the years, there have been key efforts in the task of nourishing the teaching of Christian moral life with Scripture. These endeavors affect not its place in moral theology but also in religious education. Religious education is a discipline that presents the Christian faith in the school setting.[6] It teaches the Christian moral life to help students become more critical in understanding the faith as they strive to become committed followers of Jesus.

The following discussion will lay out a summary of developments in nourishing moral theology with the use and interpretation of Scripture. This will be followed by a presentation of the developments' implications for the teaching of Christian moral life in religious education.

The grounding stage: Rooting moral theology in the Scripture

One of the significant and probably the most influential responses to Vatican II's call for a scripturally enriched moral theology was the publication of Bernard Häring's *The Law of Christ*. This three-volume work was released around the period of the Second Vatican Council gathering. In this work, Häring grounds Christian moral living in the person of Jesus who has been under-emphasized in the manuals-based moral theology. Häring deviated from the sin and law-oriented approach

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[5] Ibid.

[6] See Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis* (Pasay City, Philippines: Paulines Publishing House, 1998), para. 71.

of the pre-Vatican II moral theology which primarily focused on the observance of rules and moral obligations deduced from what was then considered as natural law. His moral theology focused on the study and understanding of the meaning of the life and teachings of Jesus who provides the ultimate foundation and inspiration of moral living. He insists that the norm, center, and goal of Christian moral theology is Christ. "The law of the Christian is Christ Himself in person. He alone is our Lord, our Savior. In Him we have life and therefore also the law of our life."[7] Häring would later on release a new work with a title that greatly departs from the "Law…": *Free and Faithful in Christ*.[8] A similar work around the "Law…" period was Rudolf Schnackenburg's book, *The Moral Teaching of the New Testament*. Like Häring, Schnackenburg argues Jesus' centrality in the study and teaching of Christian moral life. He emphasized that the Christian moral life is the human beings' response to the saving word and work of God in Jesus Christ.[9] Both Häring and Schnackenburg grounded their moral theological study in light of Jesus' good news of the Reign of God.

The recognition of Jesus' centrality in the teaching of Christian moral life, in effect, emphasized the significance of the Scripture in moral theology. Scripture accounts, especially those that contain the Jesus events, were read and studied in developing Christian moral teachings. This is different from the manuals-based moral theology which only used scripture texts to support

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[7] Bernard Häring, *The Law of Christ: Moral Theology for Priests and Laity, Volume I: General Moral Theology*, trans. Edwin G. Kaiser (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1961), vii.

[8] Bernard Häring *Free and Faithful in Christ 3 Vols.* (New York, Seabury Press, 1978-1981).

[9] See Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Moral Teaching of the New Testament* (New York, NY: Herder and Herder, 1965), 13–53.

the moral teachings that were already established through philosophical insights, reason/natural law. In his later work, *Free and Faithful in Christ,* Häring noted that it is "an unfortunate custom to refer to Scripture only after having presented one's own system, and to do so particularly in order to present proof-texts for the norms already established once and forever."[10] Through the study of scripture texts, the Christian moral life is presented as a response to God's compassionate love and calling. God's divine love and calling is seen and understood throughout the Scripture's stories, teachings, prayers and other contents but most especially and definitively in the life and teachings of Jesus who inspires and calls people, "Come, follow me." The Scripture-based moral theology has led moral theologians to recognize more seriously the central place of the written word of God as the primary source of the Church's moral teachings.

The renewal stage: The use of biblical interpretative approaches

The grounding of moral theology in Scripture necessitates a renewal in the way moral theology is taught. Biblical interpretative approaches, which were not given much attention in the pre-Vatican II moral theology began to be used in developing Christian moral teachings. Some biblical interpretative approaches are worth citing.

The *historical-critical approach*. This approach takes as its starting point the view that scripture texts must be understood in their original historical context. It claims that God could have hidden in the words of the human

[10] Bernard Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ: Moral Theology for Clergy and Laity*, vol. 1 (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing Companay, 1982), 7.

authors a message which remains concealed to the human author but which would be discovered at a later time.[11] This message is used as a source in identifying moral precepts that give direction to human actions. In this approach, theologians develop their moral teachings from the meaning that comes from the Scripture's human authors, the world in which they lived, and the contexts that formed and influenced their writing. The historical-critical approach is helpful in dealing with the problematic use of Scripture where scripture texts are merely quoted and used as proof texts. Bieringer and Pollefeyt mention that this practice can be seen in citing "isolated verses in support of our own views ("Does not the Bible say that?")."[12] The historical-critical approach, which uses a variety of methods such as textual, literal, source and form criticism helps the reader and interpreter of the Scripture to discover the original meaning of the sacred texts and prevents them from simply using these texts to defend or prove their own personal moral opinions.

The *narrative approach*. Other theologians focus on the use of biblical narratives in the teaching of Christian moral life.[13] Moral theologians who use this approach recognize the Scripture's capacity to communicate God's

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[11] See "*Sensus Plenior*" in Pontifical Biblical Commission, "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church" (1993); https://catholic-resources.org/ChurchDocs/PBC_Interp-FullText.htm (accessed 12 May 2020.

[12] See Didier Pollefeyt and Reimund Bieringer, "Risks and Challenges in Teaching the Bible," in *Normativity of the Future: Reading Biblical and Other Authoritative Texts in An Eschatological Perspective,* eds. Reimund Bieringer and Mary Elsbernd (Leuven: Paris: Walpole: Peeters, 2010), 380.

[13] See for example, Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982); Norbert Rigali, "The Story of Christian Morality," *Chicago Studies* 27/2 (1998): 173-80; William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics* (New York, NY: Continuum, 1999).

word through God's deeds presented in narrative accounts. They use scripture stories, plots and characters from both the Old and New Testaments in inspiring people to answer God's loving call in Jesus Christ who summons people to repent and believe in the Gospel. The use of the narrative approach brings the relational dimension of Christian morality because of the capacity of scripture stories to evoke personal and interpersonal response to God who reveals oneself in the daily and ordinary events and experiences in people's lives. Scripture stories also provide key insights on the kind of people that God calls to live the values and virtues they need to develop in order to grow in their loving relationship with God and one another. It departs from the legal approach and looks at Biblical stories as sources of inspiration, instruction, vision, etc.

The *socio-historical approach*. In the attempt to draw out the values and virtues that people need to develop to respond to God's call for a loving relationship, other moral theologians use social, historical, and sociological investigations on the scripture texts. They try to examine how the early Christian community received the word of God as manifested in the kind of attitudes they lived out. This approach can be seen, for example, in the work of Lisa Sowle Cahill in her study on the virtues and practices of the early Christian communities that were formed through the preaching of Paul.[14] Cahill's work advocates that the early Christian community's values and virtues must be recognized as the authoritative norm in the concrete living out of the meaning and message of the written word of God.

The use of the aforementioned scripture interpret-

[14] See Lisa Sowle Cahill, "The Bible and Christian Moral Precepts," in *Christian Ethics: Problems and Prospects*, ed. Lisa Sowle Cahill and James Childress (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1996), 3–17.

ative approaches has helped moral theologians in moving forward from the rigid and legalistic moral theology that is based on the manuals. Christian moral life is now presented as a response to God through committing themselves in Jesus. However, the said approaches are not without limitations.

The use of the historical-critical approach has the tendency to be fixed on the original meaning of the scripture texts and use this as the timeless moral guide for Christians. It must be noted that people in the biblical times and the community who wrote the scripture texts addressed faith and life issues from their particular and unique contexts. Imposing the original message of the texts to the faith and life of people today can be problematic because there are certain moral decisions and practices in the biblical times, such as slavery and the customary discriminatory treatment of women, which today are considered as dehumanizing and oppressive to people.

The drawback in the narrative approach is its limitation in scripture texts that are in the story-form. This approach is not effective in dealing with the equally rich source of moral wisdom in other literary forms of the Scripture such as prayers, epistles, and exhortations. Many of the Scripture narratives also contain experiences that could be unfamiliar or not easy to be understood by people coming from different contexts. For example, people who do not raise crops may not appreciate the depth of meaning of scripture narratives that tell stories about farming or those who work for human rights would not appreciate immediately why Abraham, who almost killed his son, is hailed as the father of faith.

The difficulty in the use of the socio-historical approach is similar with that of the historical-critical approach. Not all values and practices of the early

Christians can be imposed on the life of people today. For example, accentuating the hierarchy between women and men that is practiced by the early Christians in Corinth (1Cor 1:3) cannot be an obligatory pattern for the life of Christians today who are already living in a different context.

One of the root causes of the said problems is the nature of the Scripture as an ancient text. The Scripture was written a long time ago and many of its stories, experiences, teachings, values and other contents are already "miles away" from the actual life and experiences of people today. There is a widening gap between the historical contexts of Scripture and today's contemporary contexts. This is a problem that is challenging to the moral theologians in their work of using the Scripture in dealing with contemporary moral issues. Many of the moral concerns that must be tackled by moral theology today are unprecedented or absent in the Scriptures. This concern led to a new stage in the study and interpretation of the Scripture in moral theology.

The progressive stage: The Scripture in light of human experiences and the secular sciences

Even if there is a widening gap between the Scripture's historical context and the changing life of people today, contemporary theologians exhibit that scripture texts can still acquire new meanings that is relevant to the current life and concerns of people. This is because while the definitive revelation of God has already happened in the life and teachings of Jesus, this revelation is by no means finished. The Christian believers continue to grow in their understanding of the meaning of the Scripture texts. The following discussion presents how theologians elicit new and relevant insights from the scripture texts.

The sensitivity to contemporary human experience. Moral theologians start to start from the concrete day-to-day human experiences especially of those who suffer from poverty, marginalization, social inequality, gender discrimination and other forms of violence.[15] These human experiences are taken into account in drawing out Christian moral teachings from the Scripture. Moral theologians who focus on feminist and liberation theology, for example, use this approach in reflecting on the message of scripture texts for today.

Take, for example, how Elizabeth Johnson uses the oppressive experiences of women in reading Lk 13:10-13.[16] In this text, Jesus healed a crippled woman while he was teaching in one of the synagogues on a Sabbath day. Johnson stated that like the woman in the story who was already suffering for eighteen years, women in the world today shoulder many burdens, suffer abuses and yet are being neglected by many people even inside the church. Jesus' act of noticing the crippled woman, stopping mid-stream during his teaching, and attending to the woman show a scripture meaning that reveals "Jesus' love for women, his concern for their well-being, and his freeing act on their life."[17] This attentive love of Jesus for the crippled woman in the scripture narrative has a normative claim in the life of Jesus' followers today. It invites them to protect and be mindful of the life of women especially to those who are oppressed and

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[15] The attention to human experience was exemplified in a 2015 meeting of moral theologians from Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia and America in Padua, Italy. They discussed how to do theological ethics in view of the different concerns and experiences of people from different places. See James Keenan, ed., *Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church,* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Press, 2008).

[16] Elizabeth Johnson, "Jesus and Women: "You Are Set Free"," in *Catholic Women Speak. Bringing Our Gifts to the Table*, ed. Catholic Women Speak Network (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2015), 19–22.

[17] Ibid., 19.

marginalized. The women's experiences that Johnson brings into the reading of the Scripture shed further light on polysemic nature of the written word of God. This inchoate multiple meaning of the Scripture bridges the gap between the historical contexts of the Scripture and the contemporary life and moral concerns of present believers. It enables people to see that while the Scripture is an ancient text, the written word of God continuous to be relevant as it is life-giving in their struggle to understand and practice their Christian faith today.

Reading the Scripture in the light of human experiences is helpful in the interpretation of Christian moral teachings. The integration of human experiences in the interpretation of the Scripture makes the art and science of interpretation more grounded and philosophically tenable.[18] Thus, the message of the scripture texts are more life-affirming especially for the neglected and oppressed because human life, its joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties, is taken into account.[19] It also highlights and promotes the communitarian aspect of Christian faith which leads people to become inclusive and attentive especially to the suffering and marginalized.

The respect bestowed upon the autonomy of the secular sciences along with the interpretation of Scripture. Together with the sensitivity to human experiences in the interpretation of the Scripture, a growing number of

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[18] The theory of interpretation (hermeneutics) could verify this statement; see Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, translated by Garrett Barden and John Cumming (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975; and Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas University Press, 1976).

[19] Austin Flannery, ed., "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: Gaudium et Spes," in *The Basic Sixteen Documents Vatican II: Constitutions Decrees Declarations* (Dublin, Ireland: Dominican Publications, 1996), para. 1.

theologians have paid attention to the valuable insights that are provided by the different secular sciences. These sciences are "listened to and heard" along with the interpretation of Scripture to examine and reflect on the complexity of moral issues. Take, for example, the need to discuss the necessary Christian response to the Covid-19 pandemic that the world is currently facing. The use of Scripture alone is insufficient in understanding the socio-political, medical, cultural, and other relevant dimensions of this problem that have important bearing on the life and Christian decisions of people today. This is because most of these dimensions have not been dealt with or even understood yet by the biblical people and the communities who have written the Scripture. Many theologians demonstrate that a more relevant and holistic approach in dealing with the current world situations and issues entail the use of secular sciences such as anthropology,[20] environmental science,[21] biology[22] and other scientific disciplines. It can be seen that the Pope himself has integrated valuable insights from sociology and ecology in his discussion on the environmental problems that pleads for concrete and immediate Christian moral responses.[23]

Nevertheless, the use of human sciences along with

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[20] See, for example, Reynaldo D. Raluto, "The Anthropocentric Perspective of Western Christianity," in *Poverty and Ecology at the Crossroad* (Quezon City, Philippines: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2015), 40–44.

[21] See, for example, Anne Marie Dalton and Henry C. Simmons, "Science and Ecology," in *Ecotheology and the Practice of Hope* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010), 71–88.

[22] See, for example, Ferdinand D. Dagmang, "Amplifying *Laudato Si'* With the Science of Epigenetics," *MST Review* 21/2 (2019): 1–20.

[23] Francis, "What Is Happening to Our Common Home," in *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), paras. 16-71, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papafrancesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

Scripture in teaching Christian morality has not been warmly received by everyone. There is a concern that the use of insights from secular sciences would bring moral theology outside the Church's tradition which, along with Scripture, provides the foundational source of Christian moral life.[24] This concern claims that the use of secular sciences would make moral theology not sufficiently theological anymore.[25] Some others also see "social and human sciences… as having alternative views on human life that were incompatible with theological perspectives."[26]

The use of secular sciences does not mean turning moral theology into a secular discipline that neglects meaningful theological reflection. The formation of the Christian faith remains the paramount task of moral theologians but teaching the faith necessarily entails the openness to the sciences which can help Christians to see that their faith does come from and have bearing on the ground. The understanding and living out of the faith in Jesus is never separated and must be necessarily grounded on the everyday, physical, mundane realities of human life which can be studied and analyzed within the domain of the secular sciences. A good example on how the teaching of Christian moral life is Scripturally-grounded but at the same time enhanced by the wisdom of secular sciences can be seen in the Catholic social

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[24] See Tom Elits, "Has Moral Theology Left Catholic Tradition Behind?," *America: The Jesuit Review*, February 8, 2019, https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2019/02/08/has-moral-theology-left-catholic-tradition-behind.

[25] See Charles C. Camosy, "The Crisis of Catholic Moral Theology," *Church Life Journal*, November 15, 2018, https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/the-crisis-of-catholic-moral-theology/.

[26] Philip Hughes, "'Alternative Facts' and the Tensions Between the Social Sciences and Theology," *Pointers* 27/1 (March 2017): 2.

teachings. Since the publication of *Rerum Novarum*,[27] the church has been proclaiming the faith that is rooted in Scripture but at the same time open to the secular sciences in order to better understand and address current moral and social issues. In the Catholic social teachings, insights from the social sciences have been recognized, adapted, and integrated to communicate the saving message and challenge of the faith which remains the ultimate goal of judging their authentic use.[28]

Implications for the Teaching of Christian Moral Life in Religious Education

Vatican II's directive to nourish the teaching of moral theology with the study of Scripture is given directly to biblical and moral theologians but this is not limited to them. It is addressed to all involved in the ministry of the word including the religious educators who have to use and interpret Scripture in teaching. Religious educators have to question the very moralistic and sin-centered focus in teaching the Christian moral life and the lack of meaningful interpretation of the Scripture.[29] The developments in the use and interpretation of Scripture in moral theology have influenced on how Scripture must also be used and interpreted in the teaching of Christian moral life in religious education.

First, the directive on an enriched use of Scripture in

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[27] Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum: On Capital and Labor* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1891), http://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html.

[28] Roche, *Practical Catechesis: The Christian Faith as a Way of Life*, 50.

[29] Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, *National Catechetical Directory for the Philippines* (Manila, Philippines: Episcopal Commission for Catechesis and Catholic Education, 2007), paras. 270-72.

moral theology has been a guiding principle in the teaching of faith. This means that religious educators must also refer to Scripture in teaching fundamental moral principles such as compassion, solidarity, conscience, and freedom. Every good Christian morality lesson has to include the appropriate scripture texts and its parallel texts in explaining morality topics.

The Scripture's normative claim to the life of the Christian community must also be highlighted. This means that the Scripture must not be treated merely as story book that excites or arouses people in doing the good. Unintentionally, there are instances in religious education when the scripture texts are only used as a narrative to start a lesson. The teaching method no longer highlights the Christian message in the scripture texts that has moral implications for people's lives. In religious education, the Scripture must be used in enriching the whole process of understanding and teaching the faith. The Scripture's capacity to evaluate and critique moral situations, inform people's conscience and influence human decisions must be emphasized for the written word of God to deeply nourish the understanding and living out of the Christian moral life.

Second, the use and interpretation of Scripture in religious education should underline what God intends to communicate to the life of the present believers. There is a tendency to focus merely on the investigation and teaching of the original meaning of the scripture texts which becomes problematic and unattractive to many students. This is because many of the original meaning and message of the Scripture no longer relate with contemporary life.[30] The use and interpretation of the Scripture in religious education should go beyond the study of the original meaning of the scripture texts

[30] Ibid., 117.

because the Scripture continuously reveal new and deeper insights about what God wants to communicate to the life of people today. One way how this can be done is through the acknowledgment of the active presence of the Spirit in the scripture texts as well as in contemporary human experiences. The Spirit reaches out to the person's mind and heart by touching and inspiring the human senses, intuition and emotions through the Scripture's symbolic and metaphorical language. This reaching-in of the Spirit through the person's mind and heart empowers their human imagination "to understand, re-understand and apply the Scriptural word of God"[31] in their life today.

Third, the interpretation of Scripture in religious education must also be complemented by the use of other sources in understanding the faith. Comparable to the moral theologians' concern on human experiences in the teaching of Christian moral life, religious educators should also pay attention to the experiences of their students. In religious education "human experience refers to what happens in the life of an individual or community,"[32] including sufferings, misfortunes, and other dreadful experiences. The students' significant human experiences such as friendship, family life, self-

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[31] Joseph L. Roche and Leonardo Z. Legazpi, "Imagination and Integration in the NCDP and CFC," in *A Companion to CFC A Collection of Essays on the History, Features and Use of Our National Catechism* (Manila, Philippines: ECCCE and Word and Life Publication, 1998), 59–60.

[32] Maria Lucia C. Natividad, *Teaching the Faith* (Quezon City: Claretians Communications, 2018), 75; for the place of experience in process of theologizing, see Lieven Boeve, "Experience According to Edward Schillebeeckx: The Driving Force of Faith and Theology," in Lieven Boeve and L. Hemming, eds. *Divinising Experience: Essays in the History of Religious Experience from Origen to Ricoeur-Studies in Philosophical Theology*, 23 (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), 199-225.

giving actions in helping others, and experiences of loss and betrayal must be integral to the search for the message of Scripture. The secular sciences can be helpful in understanding and drawing out valuable insights from these experiences. These insights can be used in shedding light on a deeper and more inspiring meaning of God's presence today. These insights can also help religious educators in enabling people to appreciate the Scripture as a source in their development toward maturity in Christian faith as they deal with daily concerns and struggles in following Jesus.

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Becoming a Church of the Poor in the New Normal in Light of Amartya Sen's Capability Approach

Rhoderick John S. Abellanosa♦

Abstract: The recent experience with COVID-19, a pandemic that has further exposed the vulnerabilities of the poor in Philippine society, provides a socio-political and economic context for a re-emphasis of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines' (PCP II) Church of the Poor (COP). This paper argues that the crisis brought about by the pandemic affirms the importance of the COP but at the same time it provides a context to further deepen our understanding on what else can be done by a COP. To carry out the objective, Amartya Sen's definition of poverty that focuses on capabilities instead of income is used for synthetic analysis of poverty's face as it was experienced during the pandemic. This is used to further analyze how the Philippine Church can rekindle its commitment to be a Church of the Poor in the new normal.

Keywords: COVID-19 • Church of the Poor • New Normal • Capability Approach

Introduction

The year 2021 has been considered special by the Catholic Church in the Philippines as it marks the 500th year of the arrival of Christianity in its shores.[1] This was

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[1] The term Church in this work is broadly understood as the hierarchy, mainly the bishops with the priests. Sometimes, the CBCP

since 1521 when Portuguese navigator Ferdinand Magellan, carrying the Spanish flag, came to the Philippines and baptized a group of natives who became the first Christians in the archipelago. However, another important anniversary that is practically eclipsed by the quincentennial of Philippine Christianity is the thirtieth anniversary of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II) convoked in 1991. Practically paled by the 1521 commemoration, the Philippine Church in general has apparently not given much attention to PCP II.[2] This, however, is lamentable because of what the council wagered through the bishops, clergy, the religious, and the lay who attended it:

> What then is the Church of the Poor? It means a Church that embraces and practices the evangelical spirit of poverty, which combines detachment from possessions with a profound trust in the Lord as the

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or hierarchy is used interchangeably with "Church." The author is aware that ecclesiologically the concept of the Church (the Roman Catholic Church) includes both the ordained and the lay. However, the term is given a more particular meaning in order to highlight the specific location of the hierarchy (i.e. the bishops) in the analysis of structure, power relations, and the authorship of discourses which practically exclude the laity in the real and practical sphere of the Church. For points related to this see Antonio Moreno, SJ, *Church Society in Postauthoritarian Philippines: Narratives of Engaged Citizenship* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Press, 2008), 6-7.

[2] This does not mean that PCP II does not have any significance to the actual life of local Churches. Apparently, evidences show that the spirit of the Council has an impact in some dioceses. See Karl Gaspar, "Basic Ecclesial Communities in Mindanao: A Call to Continuing Missiological Relevance" *MST Review* 19/1 (2016): 37-66. According to Gaspar, "PCP II led to the full promotion of the setting up of the BECs in the Philippines; henceforth most dioceses in the country were encouraged to move towards this pastoral direction" (p. 38). Also see Ferdinand D. Dagmang, "From Vatican II to PCP II to BEC Too: Progressive Localization of a New State of Mind to a New State of Affairs," *MST Review* 18/2 (2016): 63-75.

> sole source of salvation. … The Church of the Poor is one whose members and leaders have a special love for the poor. … The Church of the poor will mean that the pastors and other Church leaders will give preferential attention and time to those who are poor, and will generously share of their own resources in order to alleviate their poverty and make them recognize the love of the Lord for them despite their poverty.[3]

Historians may argue that PCP II is not as historically significant as 1521. But in a theological and pastoral sense it is a landmark in the Philippine Church's renewal as it was, in essence, the Filipino people's reception of Vatican II.[4] In PCP II, the Philippine bishops have expressed commitment to lead the Church with and for the poor. Since PCP II, various pastoral letters on poverty have been issued and pronounced under different leaderships of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP).

Forward to 2020, a catastrophic year for all peoples, the poor have again become the highlight as they suffer most because of an unexpected pandemic, COVID-19. Governments were forced to impose lockdowns more known to Filipinos as the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ). When cases of COVID-19 gradually surged in some parts of the Philippines, the imposition of the ECQ highlighted the depth and extent of poverty among Filipinos.

The succeeding discussion looks into the various specific aspects where the poor are most vulnerable during the pandemic and because of the lockdowns that were imposed by the government. Then, departing from

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[3] See Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippine (Pasay: St. Paul's, 1992), Part II (Church Renewed), 125 – 136. Henceforth shall be cited as PCP II.

[4] Luis Antonio Tagle, "What Have We Become? Ten Years after PCP II," *Landas* 16/1 (2002): 108-111.

the social analysis of such an experience, the discussion will further move to how a Church of the Poor can once more reaffirm and re-invigorate its ecclesial commitment institutionalized in PCP II 1991.

Discussion Framework: The Church, Poverty, and the Poor

The Church of the Poor and the Meaning of Poverty

We begin this section with a delimitation: that our main concern is primarily on the theory (behind the discourse) of poverty and only secondarily whatever sound practice or advocacy should stem from it. In this light, the importance of a COP in a time of pandemic presupposes the necessity of asking the question who are the poor and primordially what is poverty or how do we or should we conceptualize poverty?

The said questions are important because apparently poverty is not an uncommon word in the Church's discourses and pastoral concern. It has many definitions and there are many approaches to it as there are biases among analysts, and this does not exclude the Church. Church leaders "speak about the poor much as social scientists and economists do."[5] There is no question, for example, that there is a theological and biblical basis for a preferential option for the poor but who exactly are the poor that we call our own and how do we know that rightly they are the poor to whom the Church devotes its preferential mission? For the question to mean more than its rhetorical value both the question and the one asking it should be informed by a sound perspective on poverty or concept of poverty or else the whole (ecclesial)

[5] Rhoderick John S. Abellanosa, "Poverty of Words in Poverty Discourses: The Case of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines," *Philippine Sociological Review*, 61/1 (2014): 177.

discourse would be just a bundle of exhortations lacking in creative and transforming power.[6]

Though arguably the end of all concern for the poor and their poverty is to be uplifted from destitution, but this can only succeed if an employed strategy begins with the right perspective of poverty – what it is and what it is not. This way we would able to answer, with greater confidence, the question: "[d]o prophets have useful things to say to politicians about appropriate policies toward the poor?"[7]

Constitutive of and central to PCP II's vision of renewal is to become a Church of the Poor.[8] Within the economic and political context of the country this means, among others, that the Church is actively involved in the fight against structural injustice and that the poor would feel at home with their Church as shown in their active participation in its life and mission.[9] Precisely, the

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[6] We borrow the wordings of Aloysius L. Cartagenas in his work on the hermeneutic of Catholic Social Teaching. See Aloysius Lopez Cartagenas, *Unlocking the Church's Best Kept Secret* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Press, 2012), 28. To paraphrase Cartagenas: How then are we to "rescue the meaning" of the Church of the Poor "from its limitations in the definitions and conceptualizations of various hierarchical texts and pronouncements in their varied limitations?"

[7] Mary Jo Bane and Lawrence Mead, *Lifting Up the Poor: A Dialogue on Religion, Poverty and Welfare Reform* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institute Press, 2003), 1.

[8] See Ferdinand Dagmang, "From Vatican II to PCP II to BEC Too: Progressive Localization of a New State of Mind to a New State of Affairs," *MST Review*, 18/2 (2016): 63-75; this article emphasizes that the Church of the Poor, as a principle/vision, may be made concrete through the Basic Ecclesial Communities. As PCP II states: "Our vision of the Church as communion, participation, and mission, about the Church as priestly, prophetic and kingly people, and as a Church of the Poor –a Church that is renewed – is today finding expression in one ecclesial movement. This is the movement to foster Basic Ecclesial Communities." (PCP II 137), underscoring added.

[9] Apparently there are many other dimensions of being a COP such as: (1) the embrace and practice of the evangelical spirit of

structural injustices have become more tangible as the country grapples with economic survival due to COVID-19. From the issue of the country's poor healthcare system to the increasing displacement of laborers, the question now is how shall a Church that vowed to prefer to walk in solidarity with the poor move forward in its ministry and mission? Here we are invited to revisit the very word "poverty."[10]

Poverty: Lack of Capabilities, Unfreedoms and its Multi-dimensions

There are many definitions of poverty as there are approaches to measure it as a phenomenon and condition. Nevertheless, we are going to use Amartya Sen's notion of poverty as *capability deprivation* which goes beyond its common definition as lack or lowness of

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poverty, (2) the special love for the poor by both its leaders (hierarchy) and members (laity), (3) the non-discrimination of the poor simply because of their poverty which requires a review of the Church's own structures and practices related to temporalities, (4) pastors would give preferential attention to the poor including the generous sharing of resources if only to alleviate poverty, (5) the practice of solidarity with the poor especially those afflicted by misery, (6) the poor themselves becoming evangelizers and not merely being treated as subjects of evangelization, (7) an orientation and tilt of the Church's center of gravity in favor of the needy, and (8) the willingness to follow Jesus Christ through poverty and oppression. See PCP II, 125-136, related topics are also mentioned in part III of the Conciliar Document, i.e. peasants (390), urban poor (392), fisherfolk (394), and disabled (399).

[10] After all, pastoral, theological, or moral discourse are not privileged language that are immune from the teaching-learning process of an evolving world. From this critique we proceed to how the Church in the new normal can revitalize its discourse on poverty in a manner that is more relevant and connected to the people that it ministers. See Rhoderick John S. Abellanosa, "Poverty of Words in Poverty Discourses: The Case of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines," *Philippine Sociological Review*, 61/1 (2014): 177.

income, (which has become the standard criterion of identification of poverty).[11] In an essay on Sen and Catholic Social Thought, Verstraeten gives a sound explanation why the perspectives of the economist and moral philosopher are enriching to the dynamic nature of the Church's faith-based tradition.[12]

The capability approach to poverty is underpinned by economic and ethical arguments that critique the minimalist and reductionist (income-based poverty) definition which cannot serve as basis for a robust analysis of people's lives and conditions. The philosophy behind this however is summarized in how our economist-philosopher explains the relationship between income and achievements, between commodities and capabilities, and between wealth and our ability to live as we would like.[13] Economic growth both in the micro and macro levels cannot sensibly be treated as an end in itself.[14] The desire to have more wealth is not the end in itself. To desire wealth for its own sake does not make sense. The drive to earn money is connected to a higher value and that is to live a good life, understood in Sen's terms as capabilities. "Expanding the freedoms that we have reason to value not only makes our lives richer and

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[11] Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Oxford, 1999), 19-20, 87-92. Also see by the same author *The Idea of Justice* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 254-257. A similar treatment on the topic related to income and wellbeing is found in A. Sen, *Inequality Reexamined* (New York: Russell Sage/Harvard, 1995), 28-30.

[12] Johan Verstraeten, "Catholic Social Thought and Amartya Sen on Justice," Peter Rona and Laszlo Zsolnai, eds., *Economics as a Moral Science* (Switzerland: Springer, 2017), 222.

[13] Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 13

[14] Ibid., 14. Precisely why even in the macroeconomic level, Sen (together with Joseph Stiglitz and Jean-Paul Fitoussi) would argue that conventional economic measures such as Gross Domestic Product does not and cannot capture quality of life or subjective well-being. See Joseph Stiglitz, A. Sen and J-P Fitoussi. *Mis-measuring our Lives: Why GDP Doesn't Add Up* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 64-65.

more unfettered, but also allows us to be fuller social persons, exercising our own volitions and interacting with – influencing – the world in which we live."[15]

In a later work, *The Idea of Justice*, Sen explains that not even the availability of resources would serve as a guarantee of fuller wellbeing. Simply put, an income that is way above the minimum wage may not automatically mean that one is not poor. There is a variability in the relationship between resources and poverty, one that is deeply contingent on the characteristics of the respective people and the environment in which they live both natural and social.[16] This is an important point to highlight because one has to realize, as the discussion unfolds, that in reality – as it is in many countries – the poor are not just those who live below the poverty line. And as Sen would put it, real poverty (understood in terms of capability deprivation) may be much more intense than what we can deduce from income data.[17]

The foregoing frames our interpretation or analysis of the poor's experience in a time of pandemic. By analyzing and reflecting on the condition of the poor beyond income we get to create a gestalt of their interconnected unfreedoms. The lack or absence of capabilities are basically limitations that are not only economic but also social and political in nature causing and creating more disabilities on the part of the poor, and furthermore preventing them from achieving those things that they find more reason to value in life.

At this juncture the discussion turns to the face of poverty in a time of pandemic specifically within the context of the Philippine experience when the Enhanced Community Quarantine was enforced and thereby

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[15] Ibid., 14-15.

[16] Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 254.

[17] Ibid., 256.

imposing many limitations on the lives of the Filipinos.

The Face of Poverty in a Time of Pandemic: What it Means to be Poor in a Time of Crisis

Poverty in the Philippines: The Figures

Poverty incidence in the Philippines is at 16.6%, which means that 17.6 million Filipinos are poor.[18] According to the Philippine Statistics Authority [PSA] a family of five (5) needs around 10,727 PhP to meet their minimum basic food and non-food needs. With the same family size 7,528 PhP per month is needed to meet food needs. Supplementing this income-based measure of poverty is the self-rated survey on poverty by the Social Weather Stations which as of December 2019 reports that 54% among Filipino families consider themselves as *mahirap* or poor. The estimated numbers of Self-Rated Poor families are 13.1 million for December and 10.3 million for September. The latest Self-Rated Poverty rate is the highest since the 55% in September 2014.[19]

The figures above are intended to basically provide a measurable starting point. But as has been established earlier it is also important to analyze the interconnected unfreedoms of the poor. In fact, a reading of poverty using

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[18] Philippine Statistics Authority, "Proportion of Poor Filipinos Estimated at 16.6 percent in 2018" [available online]: https://psa.gov.ph/poverty-press-releases/nid/144752.

[19] Social Weather Stations, "Fourth Quarter 2019 Social Weather Survey: Self-Rated Poverty rises by 12 points to 5-year-high 54%" [available online]: https://www.sws.org.ph/swsmain/artcldisppage/?artcsyscode=ART-20200123140450. In terms of the capacity to purchase food, SWS in its December 2019 survey found that 35% of families rate their food as Mahirap or Poor, termed by SWS as Food-Poor. This is 6 points above the 29% in September 2019. The estimated numbers of Food-Poor families are 8.6 million in December and 7.1 million in September.

capability as a criterion would highlight that in the face of a pandemic there are also some, if not many, wage earners who are placed in a vulnerable situation because the paralysis caused by the ECQ increased their unfreedoms, incapability, and deprivation. This brings us to a discussion on poverty as a phenomenon with various dimensions: poverty in terms of location, weak housing materials, vulnerability to exploitation, powerlessness, and proneness to human rights violations.[20]

Poverty has a Location: The Issue of Housing

It was perceived during the pandemic that Filipinos and many among the poor were unruly and thus non-compliant of government restrictions. The common observation was that those who live in slums or in urban poor communities were stubborn in following the imposed guidelines from national and local governments especially in terms of social distancing and curfew. Apparently, the several weeks of ECQ highlighted the bias of some Filipinos who belong to the middle and high income classes against the poor especially in highly urbanized cities like Metro Manila and Metro Cebu.[21]

People's responses to the government's ECQ varied depending on their economic capabilities. Physical distancing was not hard to comply for those who have enough space but not for those who live in densely

[20] Robert Chambers, "Poverty and Livelihood: Whose Reality Counts?" in Environment and Urbanization 7(1): 175. Also, R. Chambers, "What is Poverty? Who Asks? Who Answers?" in *Poverty in Focus* (Dec 2006): 3-4.

[21] Take the case of Sitio Zapatera, Barrio Luz in Cebu City. See Marit Stinus-Cabugon, "135 Covid-19 cases in Cebu City neighborhood" [available online]: https://www.manilatimes.net/2020/04/20/opinion/columnists/135-covid-19-cases-in-cebu-city-neighborhood/716241/

populated urban poor communities. The location and arrangement of the houses of the poor do not follow the same formalities and luxuries in spacing, symmetry and of course the quality of materials with those who belong to the middle class or high income brackets.[22] Precisely why the strict observance of the ECQ was relatively not difficult to observe by the middle class and the rich. But this was not the case with households with ten family members in a thirty square meter room.

COVID-19 magnified the material face of poverty. It was very clear in the experience of the urban poor that being poor is not just about lack or absence of income but the vulnerability to all forms of threats. The pandemic made the lives of the poor more difficult in various counts. First, they were forced to stay at home which, unlike the rich or the middle class, literally meant being imprisoned in a practically paralyzing situation. Second, the set-up of their villages was a factor that increased the probability of transmission. In Cebu City, the pattern obviously revealed that the concentration of the cases were mostly in slums packed with people.[23]

The COVID-19 pandemic lays bare before our eyes that affordable housing is a serious problem in the Philippines. According to Arcilla, "the lack of affordability is a persistent problem in socialized housing programs in the Philippines. Affordability is a critical component of the right to adequate housing. Without access to affordable housing, the poor are forced to create

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[22] Robert Chambers, "Participation, Pluralism and Perceptions of Poverty: a Conference Paper" in *Paper for the International Conference on Multidimensional Poverty*: Brasilia August 29-31 2005, p. 14.

[23] Ryan Macasero and Michael Bueza "MAP: Where are the coronavirus cases in Cebu City?" [available online]: https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/260554-map-coronavirus-cases-cebu-city

homes in unsafe spaces and in slums."[24] Since the late 1990s the government has estimated some 700,000 units for Metro Manila, and approximately three (3) million in the entire Philippines.[25] Sadly, it has been an unsolved problem passed on from one administration to another. Despite the promises of past administrations (e.g. President Estrada who was most popular in his pro-poor campaign advocacy) many Filipinos have remained without decent homes or places of dwelling.

The poor population management strategy of the government (not to mention that delayed legislation of the Reproductive Health law) has exacerbated the problem of congestion in urban areas. The National Economic Development Authority (NEDA) reported an estimated backlog of over 900,000 units between 2005 and 2010. Already in 1994, economist Arsenio Balisacan emphasized the correlation between housing and health, which according to him (and this was decade ago) are growing concerns of the poor rapidly urbanizing areas.[26] Logically, there is an inverse relationship between the quality of housing and the chances of vulnerability to health hazards, and this is something felt more intensely by the urban poor during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Economic Exploitation

In a trickle-down economy, any crisis that would hit the main economic drivers would automatically sacrifice the poor who are low income, daily wage, or seasonal

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[24] Chester Antonino Arcilla, "Ensuring the affordability of socialized housing: Towards liveable and sustainable homes for the poor," *UP CIDS Policy Brief* 2019-15, 1.

[25] Edna Co, et al., *Philippine Democracy Assessment: Economic and Social Rights* (Pasig: Anvil, 2007), 47.

[26] Arsenio Balisacan, *Poverty, Urbanization and Development* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Press, 1994), 77-78.

earners. The ECQ due to Covid-19 hit hardest vendors, tricycle, and *habal-habal* drivers, and small-time mechanics. In effect their powerlessness was highlighted – concrete in the face of income-less citizens who would be dependent on government subsidies and prone to political manipulation. In its March 19, 2020 impact assessment, the National Economic Development Authority (NEDA) forecasted that given the "simultaneous adverse effects on the supply and the demand side of the economy" the Philippines should expect "a cumulative loss of PHP428.7 to PHP 1,355.6 billion in gross value added (in current prices)." This would be "equivalent to 2.1 to 6.6 percent of nominal GDP in 2020." NEDA further added that "without mitigating measures, this would imply a reduction in the Philippine's real GDP growth to -0.6 to 4.3 percent in 2020."

Consequent to economic losses would be displacement of labor. As early as April 2020, the Department of Labor and Employment's (DOLE) Job Displacement Monitoring Report registered a total of 108,620 workers from 2,317 establishments affected due to the implementation of Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs) and Temporary Closure (TC).[27] Uncertainty in the government's aid and subsidy were issues among low-income families. Displaced workers who had to continue feeding their family had to partly if not largely rely on the assistance of the government. When the ECQ, for example, was implemented on March 28, some people in Cebu City,

[27] Either the workers earned less due to the adjustment of the work scheme or schedule or did not earn at all. Around 889 establishments with 41,311 workers implemented FWAs while 368 companies engaged in reduction of workdays, affected 15,556 workers. Other companies also imposed forced leave. Around 9,941 workers were without work from around 225 companies while 58 other companies with 3,655 employees were also affected by the anti-virus measures.

without hesitation, went to their barangay hall in order to inquire about the ECQ pass and the subsidies or allowances. Issues and concerns about the Social Amelioration Package (SAP) became divisive points among social classes.

It is easy to just follow the government's policies if there is trust but sadly this is not the case with many Filipinos in relation to their leaders. Given this context, again, the poor were labelled as ignorant and disobedient to rules. This was very much concrete when Barangay Luz of Cebu City was first announced to have a surge of COVID-19 positive cases among its residence. Comments such as (in Cebuano) *kining mga squatter gahi gyud ug ulo* (these informal settles are hard-headed or stubborn) and *bogo gyud ning mga tawhana* (these people are dumb) were all around social media. But the people who were called stubborn and dumb were the same masses who cheered for the politicians during elections. Sadly, these are the people who are continually exploited as warm bodies in a populist-based politics. There were reports, for example, that some barangays required a voter's identification (ID) card as requirement for government assistance. "Dispersed and anxious as they are about access to resources, work and income, it is difficult for them [the poor] to organize or bargain. Often physically weak and economically vulnerable, they lack influence. Subject to the power of others, they are easy to ignore or exploit. Powerlessness is also, for the powerful, the least acceptable point of intervention to improve the lot of the poor."[28]

It was easy for some Filipinos to just say that a total lockdown or even a martial law should be implemented in order to save everyone. But this was according to those who lived with safety nets in their socio-economic

[28] Chambers, *Poverty and Livelihood*, 190.

security (savings, continual income, investments, networks and connections). These people need not worry so much about life's burdens caused by the ineffective and inefficient state bureaucracy.

Powerlessness: Humiliation and Human Rights Violations

The material conditions of the poor made them more prone to abuses by the police or officers of the law during the ECQ.[29] Sen explains: "…destitution can produce provocation for defying established laws and rules."[30] The lack or even absence of any capability and capacity to push their agenda made the poor subject to various layers of political and even legal abuse.[31]

This was the experience with some residents of San Roque, a slum area in Quezon City. They were dispersed and some twenty-one (21) were jailed after *Kadamay*, an activist group, was accused to have incited them to turn against the government.[32] Then there was the incident in Parañaque City that involved the alleged "torture" of curfew violators. Allegedly the violators were made to sit under the sun for an hour. The barangay captain of Barangay San Isidro clarified that he did not punish the

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[29] See Rhoderick John S. Abellanosa, "Poverty's Political Face in a Slum: Focus on Human Rights" in Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society 39 [2011]: 149 – 162. Also see R.J.S. Abellanosa, "The Political Face of Poverty: Cases of Human Rights Violations in Pasil, Cebu City" in *Journal of Asia Pacific Studies* 2/2 (2011): 132-148.

[30] Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence* (New York: Norton, 2006), 142-143.

[31] According to Sen, "poverty and inequality closely relate to each other" in *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (New York: Oxford, 1981), 23.

[32] CNN Philippines, "21 protesters demanding food aid arrested in Quezon City" [available online]: https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/4/1/quezon-city-protesters-arrested-.html

violators as there were merely asked to "stay outside the barangay hall to maintain social distancing while their names were being taken."[33] One of those arrested (alias John) said: "It's easy for some people not to go outside because they have food and money. But there are people like me who need to go outside to work so we can eat something for the day."

Clearly, the poor can easily become victims of the power that is meant to guide and protect them. Without power and influence, plus ignorance, joblessness, and greater vulnerability to diseases, the poor have little chance of asserting their rights most especially in the most difficult situations.[34]

It can be tentatively concluded at this point that the experience of the Filipino poor during the COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized the gaps and failures of a state that claims to govern democratically. Such failure is explainable by the fact that the universal value of democracy is more than just being a mere mechanism of maintaining political representation and power transmission. Democracy, and election as a core element of it, should translate to people's achievements of greater capabilities through social and economic rights, and thus give them greater reason to continually appreciate their freedom not only as an instrument to achieve certain ends (in life) but also as an end in itself.[35] Elections and the whole idea and practice of representation are just aspects of democracy among others. In Sen's words:

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[33] Dexter Cabalza, "Paranaque village chief accused of 'torturing' curfew violators" [available online]: https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1248527/paranaque-village-chief-accused-of-torturing-curfew-violators

[34] See R.J.S. Abellanosa, "Poverty's Political Face in a Slum: Focus on Human Rights." *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 39 (2011):154-160.

[35] Amartya Sen, "Democracy as a Universal Value," *Journal of Democracy* 10/3 (1999): 11.

> …even elections can be deeply defective if they occur without the different sides getting an adequate opportunity to present their respective cases, or without the electorate enjoying the freedom to obtain news and to consider the views of the competing protagonists. Democracy is a demanding system, and not just a mechanical condition (like majority rule) taken in isolation.[36]

Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic more specifically the sustained crisis which the poor have undergone, capabilities, understood within the framework of Sen's philosophy, means the facilitation by the very democratic process and its translation ultimately to the citizens' achievement of capabilities that are necessary for the expansion of freedoms. This means the minimization of poverty as a condition of incapability. This means, concretely, the people's greater chances to: access to housing, transportation, healthcare particularly hospitalization, food and water security, education, and stable employment. Apparently, these social needs have been part of the promises of politicians during elections. Sadly, they continue to capitalize on the lack or the absence of basic services thus perpetuating people's patronage and dependence on non-systematized government assistance oftentimes disguised as charity. Consequently, elections are practically ceremonial formalities that exacerbate our dysfunctional democracy.[37]

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[36] Ibid., 9.

[37] See Jane Hutchison, "The 'Disallowed' Political Participation of Manila's Urban Poor," *Democratization* 14/5 (2007): 853-872. Hutchison has aptly described the situation: "the alternative modes of political participation – of a societal incorporation type – are created that assume policy consensus and interest convergence over social inclusion taking a particular, neo-liberal, path that effectively limits the urban poor's entitlements to the securitisation of their own self-built shelters" (p. 868).

Poverty is a word commonly used and discussed during the election period and largely exploited by politicians in order to gain support from the masses. Sadly, people's access to decent housing, transportation, healthcare particularly hospitalization, food and water security, education, and stable employment remain largely and extensively unmet. After elections, officials of both national and local governments would be busy with day-to-day politics. The multidimensional experiences of vulnerability and poverty among some Filipinos in the face of a crisis further highlights the deficiencies of Philippine democracy specifically in the inadequacy or absence of basic services.

The Church of the Poor: A Critique of Three-Decade Ecclesial Discourse In Light of the COVID-19 Experience

The Church has a prophetic role in the political sphere rooted in the Gospel values. To borrow the words of Jacques Maritain on democracy, we may, in essence, speak of the same with politics: "it cannot do without the prophetic factor, and that the people need a prophet."[38] Precisely why there is a need for a critical analysis and reflection on where the COP, since PCP II, could also have focused its engagement with the government and thus helped generate and strengthen the advancement of people's right to social and economic welfare. After all, if politics ought to actualize humanity's moral and ethical persuasions, then the Church must meet those who are in a position of power in that point where politics and morality intersect. To rephrase a moral theologian: it is never enough (for the Church) to just notice those whom

[38] Jacques Maritain, "The Democratic Character," Robert Caponigri, ed. *Modern Catholic Thinkers, vol. II* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), 350.

others would rather not, and look 'preferentially' at their concerns. The added task is to ensure that the poor whatever dehumanized faces they may wear be encountered less as objects of pity but more as interacting subjects.[39]

An Examination of Priorities and Discourses

In 2012, the CBCP through Cebu Archbishop Jose Palma, issued a *Pastoral Exhortation on the Era of New Evangelization*.[40] The document explains the Philippine Church's preparations for the quincentennial celebration in 2021 and acknowledges the continuity in the local Church's thrust from PCP II up to the present. It underscores that constitutive of evangelization is, among others, the "imperative of 'bringing Good News to the poor' *(pauperes evangelizantur)*."[41] In fact, the CBCP did not deny that the Philippine Church still has "a long way from the vision to becoming in truth a 'church of the poor'—committed to struggle to bring down poverty among our people, committed to striving to do all we can to help bring about 'a civilization of justice and love'." According to the Exhortation:

> The Year of the Poor is "dedicated to committing ourselves more firmly to our vision of becoming truly a Church of the Poor. The new evangelization is also a

[39] Dionisio M. Miranda, "What will You Have Me Do for You? The Theological Ethics Agenda from an Asian Perspective," James Keenan, ed., *Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church: The Plenary Papers from the First Cross Cultural Conference on Catholic Theological Ethics* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Press, 2008), 178.

[40] Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, "CBCP Pastoral Exhortation on the Era of New Evangelization (longer version)" in http://cbcponline.net/cbcp-pastoral-exhortation-on-the-era-of-new-evangelization-longer-version/, access 1 May 2020.

[41] Ibid.

> powerful call from the Lord to follow in His footsteps to be evangelically poor. How far have we journeyed to our vision of Church? How shall we assist the materially poor to face the challenges of hunger and poverty, of globalization and climate change? And together with them eradicate the evil of corruption and the economic and political imbalances of our society? At the same time we realize that the materially poor in our midst have the God-given power to tell the story of the poor Christ who by His poverty liberates and enriches us. The whole Church, rich and poor, powerful and powerless, have to be in solidarity in the work of restoring integrity and truth, justice and peace – love – in our benighted land.[42]

Apparently, the bishops did not fail to mention the poor in their pronouncements. The year 2015 was, in fact, declared as the Year of the Poor.[43] But five years since then, and most especially in light of the current experience of COVID-19, what has happened to the poor? What was the significance and the impact of the Church's pronounced commitment to work in solidarity for the restoration of justice and peace in our land? In hindsight, it can be said that although it is not fair to say that the Church has taken for granted the poor but neither is it not unfair to say that the Church has not said enough for the poor that it has identified to be its own in PCP II. It is true that within the Church there are religious congregations and sectors who have done genuine service to the poor. For example, Catholic educational institutions through the community extension services, social action and outreach programs have helped so many among those who are least in society in more ways than one. However, it is one thing to speak of these *ad intra institutions* and their initiatives, it is another thing to

[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid.

speak of the Church specifically its leadership and how it deals with poverty as a social issue and as a systemic problem of the country.

Apparently, poverty is not a top priority in the CBCP's pastoral agenda as evidenced by its documents or pronouncements. In a study on Episcopal Conferences and their theory and praxis based on Catholic social teaching, Terence McGoldrick observes that the statements on CST by the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) "dropped from an average of 2.1 per year over the 1990s to 1.5 per year from 2000 to 2012."[44] PCP II (around 1991 up to 1992) according to the author marks the surge in lengthy statements. However, the years that follow especially those closer to present have seen the change in discursive style wherein the bishops would typically issue one-page statements that focus on particular issues or events like elections, nuclear power plants, and tax law. Furthermore, in the past 12 years, the brief statements by the CBCP "have appeared at about twice the rate of the longer statements (2.8 vs. 1.5 per year)."[45] McGoldrick adds that the statements of the CBCP "indicate trust and cooperation among the bishops and the EC president and staff, after decades of contending on these sensitive social issues. They do not require a plenary meeting or consultative process and allow the Church to have a voice in the regular flow of events in local society."[46]

The approach to poverty in the Church's discourses basically shows lack of focus in its treatment of the issue. If we trace the continuum of the Church's discourse back to PCP II, it can be said that the post-PCP II concerns of

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[44] Terence McGoldrick, "Episcopal Conferences Worldwide and Catholic Social Thought, in Theory and Praxis: An Update," *Theological Studies* 75/2 (2014): 382.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid.

the Church have practically detoured from the vision of the plenary council and it can be rightly said that becoming a Church of the Poor has remained largely an unfinished project. The vision of the Philippine Church according to the Acts and Decrees of PCP II did not "just aim at sustaining the usual charitable activities of the Church which has been around since the time of the first mendicant friars."[47] The preferential option waged in 1991 was in itself a theology of liberation which in essence proposed a commitment to "combat the systemic and structural dimensions of poverty."[48]

A survey of the documents issued by the CBCP from 1991 up to 2011 would reveal that even after PCP II the discourses (pastoral letters and exhortations) do not form a single, coherent and consistent empirically grounded hierarchical discourse on poverty (the closest could be the Exhortation on the Philippine Economy). Apparently, the pastoral letters and exhortations were written by different CBCP presidents and it goes without saying that their substance and style, as it appears, vary from one conference leadership to another. They were responses to specific issues within a particular socio-political and economic context. Hence, despite the Philippine hierarchy's passionate discourses against poverty not one of the documents can be taken as the sole concrete framework which the CBCP may use in order to understand the problem of poverty. It is in fact puzzling how the CBCP can continue talking about poverty, siding with the poor, and condemning government programs for being anti-poor without a minimum standard concept or definition of poverty.

Prior to COVID-19, the Church's estrangement from

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[47] Rhoderick John S. Abellanosa, "Discursive Detours and Weak Gatekeeping: The Deficit of the Philippine Bishops' Church of the Poor Discourse," *Political Theology* 16/3 (2015): 230.

[48] Ibid., 230-231.

its people was increasing. The sustained support to President Rodrigo Duterte's war on drugs by Catholic Filipinos no less shows the contrast between the said to be deep Filipino religiosity on the one hand and their disconnect from the official theological paradigm of the hierarchy on the other. One cannot but wonder why the Church especially the bishops continue to talk about the poor; but then who are these poor that they are talking about?

In Search for a Church of the Poor: A Challenge to the Philippine Church Leadership

The ambivalent political behavior of the Philippine hierarchy (CBCP) with the different presidential administrations can be accounted for the incoherent attitude and approach towards its own commitment to be a Church of the Poor. Even a synthetic rundown of how the Church politically positioned itself in recent years, show that in several instances poverty is not always a top priority in comparison to the other interests of the hierarchy. After EDSA Dos in 2001 the Church distanced itself from politics under the presidency of Gloria Macapagal Arroyo.[49] Her concessionary attitude towards the bishops pushed back the needed pressure from the Church to advance some of the social reforms in the country that were long overdue. Under the presidency of Benigno Aquino III from 2010 up to 2016, the bishops were focused in fighting against the Reproductive Health bill. The issue on reproductive health could have been an opportunity for a more serious dialogue on the problem of poverty in the Philippines. The Church could have

[49] R.J.S. Abellanosa, *Discursive Detours and Weak Gatekeeping*, 234. Also see Rhoderick John S. Abellanosa, "The CBCP and Philippine Politics: 2005 and After," *Asia Pacific Social Science Review*, Vol. 8/1 (2008): 73-88.

interrogated the government's population agenda in light of the Church's teaching on integral development. In fact, the Church could have come to the defense of the poor by asking the government if it has concrete parallel developmental plans on how to help the poor other than just promoting women's rights through RH devices.

Unfortunately, the bishops were more focused on what would become an ideological theme of "pro-life versus pro-choice." The hierarchy and their supporters including the lay who can be classified as *"churched"* were more concerned with defending the family, protecting the sanctity of marriage and virginity, among others. The purist theological paradigm that dominated the discourse of the hierarchy especially during the first years of Benigno Aquino's administration contributed to the Church's further alienation from its people. It became clear that many of the clergy were more concerned with their interests and could afford to disregard the signs of the times when pushed to the defensive in terms of its own agenda.[50]

Then Rodrigo Duterte came to power and practically overturned the system left by the previous administration. The focus of the political debate has shifted to the need to end the proliferation of illegal drugs vis-à-vis human rights. With a total commitment and a passionate conviction to kill all drug users up to the last one of them, the Church has found in Duterte a different kind of political drama. With a high approval rating and a highly effective social media machinery, bishops and priests have difficulty engaging Duterte. The president's use of ad hominem attacks that can really discredit the

[50] See Eric Marcelo Genilo, S.J., "Epilogue: The Church of PCP II after the RH Bill Debate," Eric Marcelo Genilo, Agnes Brazal, and Daniel Franklin Pilario, eds., *The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines: Quo Vadis?* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Press, 2015), 169-189.

credibility of any opponent has pushed back the Church to the margins. Unfortunately, the marginalized bishops and priests are not getting support from their marginalized flock. The hierarchy and the clergy have not also succeeded in putting up a united front against Duterte. Not even the bishops who used to be vocal against government issues could put up a strong criticism against the issues of alleged human rights violations of the current administration. Despite the marginalization of the poor under Duterte, the Church's statements are crafted to sound safe, balanced, and calibrated. Forced to go back to its sacristy, the Church especially the bishops have become focused on internal ecclesiastical affairs. Precisely why it is not surprising to hear preparations for the quincentennial of Christianity's arrival in the Philippines mainly and essentially in religious and liturgical terms.

The predicament of the poor during the COVID-19 pandemic synthesized the so many gaps and deficiencies of Philippine society. We can enumerate at least seven areas where the Philippine government has failed is people: (1) healthcare system and health facilities, (2) poverty and urbanization, (3) assistance to people with physical and mental disabilities and the ageing, (4) mass public transport system not just in the capital region but also in the other major or developing urban centers in the country, (5) food security and agriculture, (6) family planning and population management, and (7) decentralized governance (grounded in the principle of subsidiarity).

Apparently, the abovementioned agenda have been largely disregarded by the Philippine government. The pandemic has shown that Philippine democracy more concretely in the aspect of social and economic rights remains largely wanting. This is not to say that efforts were not made in order to help people move forward and

survive amidst a serious threat. Indeed, it is fair to say that there were efforts and to some extent such did help people cross the threshold of difficulty in the current situation. However, the experiences of people presented above using the gestalt of the political face of poverty goes to show that many of the programs and projects across administrations lack continuity and coherence. Such a failure is not only a matter of political ineffectiveness or inefficiency but also of ethical bankruptcy.

The exploitative conditions that have been sustained through the years were clearly highlighted by the people's poverty and their vulnerability to the very system that is supposed to defend them during COVID-19. They have become objects of humiliation and (human rights) violations, and although they were given assistance but such was also not without any color of political opportunism. It is unthinkable how a country that professes, through its constitution, to "promote a just and humane society and promote the common good under the rule of law and the regime of truth and freedom," among other values, continues to live in a widening economic divide.

After decades of elections the concept and practice of representation have been proven to be a failure in facilitating people's movement out from their unfreedoms. This is concrete in leaders who are popular but who have not optimized the powers and opportunities of representation in order to maximize the country's political resources and thereby create tangible benefits to people: basic services in the form of healthcare, housing, public transportation and food. Representation has been used to further perpetuate the same set of representatives. And as the system continues in all its outdated fashion poor Filipinos are continually caught in various forms of unfreedoms and thus deprived of so many capabilities and opportunities. They have remained low

in financial literacy, lacking in support systems and other economic safety nets. Precisely why in a time of pandemic they cannot but panic due to a perceived difficulty in life that would practically push them to greater vulnerabilities.

But the whole situation is not just a political and economic concern. It is also one that should deeply concern the Church. Vatican II after all has clearly said that the people's grief and anxieties are also that of the Church. A COP should not only say enough on these issues, it has to understand well enough the reality of poverty in the Philippines.

Toward a Renewed Preferential Option for the Poor by a Church in the New Normal

Much has been said about society's changes in the so-called new normal but what awaits the Church in a world that has suffered a lot and will perhaps continue to because of COVID-19? In a society that is increasingly secular, the Church, and here we specifically speak of its leadership, has a calling to renew in a radical way its preferential option for the poor. Already in 1967, Pope Paul VI emphasized the Church's deep interest in and concern for the progressive development of peoples particularly in "the case of those peoples who are trying to escape the ravages of hunger, poverty, endemic disease and ignorance; of those who are seeking a larger share in the benefits of civilization and a more active improvement of their human qualities; of those who are consciously striving for fuller growth."[51]

A renewed preferential option for the poor by the Philippine Church coincides and gives fuller meaning to the commemoration of the quincentennial anniversary of

[51] *Populorum Progressio*, 1

Christian presence in the country. Such an event is auspicious for the Church to exercise its prophetic and pastoral role by engaging politics through rational discourse, and that by purifying the State especially in areas where it has failed to live up to promote justice being the intrinsic criterion of all political life, it would revitalize its very communion with the world whose joys, grief, and anxieties are also its own.

The COVID-19 pandemic may be viewed in various ways through various lenses. One may read things mainly from the perspective of charity, that is, the catastrophic event was a moment to help one's neighbors through whatever initiative such as donations, fund drives, and outreach activities among others. These are undeniably essential and even integral to the collective calling to walk with one another in the spirit of fraternity. However, one may also read, and still from a Christian perspective, the situation as a moment of prophetic dialogue with the world especially with those who are in power to whom the achievement of justice in the sphere of politics is both a responsibility and a vocation. This means that, learning from the situation, the Church especially its leadership, must not miss out reading the signs of the times of the whole situation, being attentive to the cries of the poor who have been victims of social injustice, and whose poverty have become more intense under conditions of limited mobility and limited access to life's basic necessities.

Under the new normal, it is imperative for a COP to review and reflect its commitment to the poor keeping in mind with humility that though the Church is a teacher it has a lot to learn from society and the world because the truth that comes from God continues to gradually unfold in the landscape of human experience. If we may appropriate to the Church what one moral theologian says of Christian ethics, if the Church is an instrument

for the methodic search for the humanizing will of God then the routine extinction or degradation of human life through the absence or denial of basic needs like food, water, and shelter cannot but be the primary content or subject matter, as the gospel itself is witness.[52]

Within the framework of Amartya Sen's perspective, the advocacy to help the poor not excluding lobbying for reforms that should benefit the poor, should focus on increasing people's capabilities and chances of wellbeing. In a post-pandemic scenario, efforts to help the poor no matter how well publicized cannot be supported until and unless they would lead to structural changes that would guarantee a systematized protection of the poor in many aspects of welfare services should it be the case that another wave of pandemic strikes. Learning from what happened to the Filipino nation, a Church of the poor in a new normal has to be more assertive in heightening people's consciences and efforts to demand the government to recognize the ethical imperatives of governance.

Apparently, the agenda abovementioned are difficult to put forward under the administration of President Rodrigo Duterte. But a Church of the poor cannot just enjoy living within the confines of its conveniences. We have seen how much the poor have suffered in a time of pandemic not really because the virus is fatal but because as a society we remain unprepared to handle worse situations given the vulnerabilities of people due to the experience of multidimensional unfreedoms: poor infrastructure, limitations in mobility, lack of savings, vulnerability to abuse, powerlessness and lack of bargaining capacity and the pre-existence of various health-related concerns among many others.

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[52] Miranda, *What Will You Have Me Do for You?*, 177.

> He who wages to prefer the poor must constantly struggle against all forms of obstacle to feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, and defending the oppressed among others and this even includes unceasingly struggling against the fear of losing one's riches, comfort, benefactors and political allies as a consequence of siding with those who are abused, marginalized, forgotten, and least favored in society.[53]

[53] Abellanosa, *Discursive Detours and Weak Gatekeeping*, 245.

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Society and Culture: Matrix and Schema for Character Formation

Ferdinand D. Dagmang♦

Abstract: This paper deals with how society and culture may shape us; how some sub-cultures may shape 'others'; how we behave and represent our own worlds replete with models for our imitation. Despite the socio-cultural determination, it is assumed in this study that in the process of formation, choice is possible; and that choice is limited. Choice is possible when one is free to choose, that is, when one is able to choose other than the possible range of choices offered by society and culture. I am free to choose my food because I am free to choose other than those offered by McDonalds or KFC or Chowking or Jollibee, etc. because I am free to refuse them and the other range of choices possible. Character formation (and choice) faces limits when the range of choices is narrowed down to what is necessary—more so when one is constrained by mimetic upbringing, one that is largely limited to imitating others' or elders' choices.

Keywords: Society • Culture • Enculturation • Scripting • Mimesis • Character Formation

Introduction

What if Filipinos were born in a place where respect is abundant and humility and decency plentiful? Or today's citizens were born, at least, in a time when everyone was treating everyone kindly and leaders were respectful and have not seen or heard of intolerance, high-handedness, overbearing patriarchy, corruption,

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lapdog mentality [my apologies to lapdogs], and super-abundant idiocy? Would it not be a blissful scenario if all of us were born in that ideal place and time? How do we imagine ourselves today if we were raised in "a time when men were kind; when their voices were soft".[1]

We are, however, in a real world that gave shape (and will still give shape) to the likes of Trumps, Bolsonaros, and Dutertes with all their trolls and minions swarming around and hovering above the rest of us. How do we deal with what many of us would perceive as a situation filled with problematic characters? (Let us hope that we do not miss to take into account the situation that produced them.)

One of my students offered this: "Well, we are dealing with cards and we should make the most of what is dealt to us." But, should we really just have to make do with what's in our hands? That would be one Stoic formula: have a good poker face since your cards cannot be changed anyway—otherwise, you're busted!

While change is necessary during these troubled COVID-19 times, perhaps we could still devote a few pages to some ideas in aid of interpretation about ourselves in relation to our society and culture that have somehow shaped us.

And I hope no one will bash me with the 11th Thesis on Feuerbach.[2] Thus, below, I present some notes about: how society and culture may shape us; how some sub-cultures may shape 'others'; how we behave by embodying our own worlds full of models for us to imitate.

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[1] Lines from the song "I Dreamed a Dream" from *Les Miserables*.

[2] Karl Marx wrote: "Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it." Original German: *Die Philosophen haben die Welt nur verschieden interpretiert; es kommt aber darauf an, sie zu verändern.*

Determination—A Spectrum of Formative Objects

Human beings could not have been born into a world of their choice. This is a determination that all natural beings cannot avoid. In one's world, kinship, biological paternity and maternity are beyond an offspring's personal choice. Also, we cannot choose an ideal world where an Imelda Marcos, or a Francisco Duque III, or a Janet Lim-Napoles or a Mocha Uson should have been born [although there is no assurance that they would also embody that ideal world]; fortunately, some individuals nobler than us were also born into a world that we know today—individuals who are not of dubious qualities, but inspirations and models of life-giving behavior: Oscar Romero, Nelson Mandela, Malala Yousafzai…

So, despite the Trumps and Dutertes around us, it is theoretically possible that we can make our own choice to be with the likes of Romero or Mandela, rather than with the kinds that produce lies, arrogance, rudeness, brazenness and corruption. That is, if one does really have those conditions or opportunities to be in the company of righteous people.

The usual institutions and familiar relationships are simply there, warts and all, before choices. These have all been established even before the subjects have become aware of themselves. Individuals, however, may choose from whatever is possible (like some individuals as friends, or specific work as career, or an inspiring lifestyle as vocation) from their world's feasible sets that provide a continuum of varying components available. In such worlds, individuals get entangled with involvements and socializations—where they would eventually acquire their personal tastes, dispositions, habits, or "second-nature."[3]

[3] Lyotard refers to the "first-nature humanity" as the indeterminate status of childhood or its residues, and could be

People generally regard their cultural and social standards as guiding and leading them toward something good (even if that good is really, culturally, ambivalent in its direction). They teach children to think and do the same—making possible the imprinting of the myriad cultural and social schemata or scripts in their memories which serve to trigger cues for feeling, thinking, and acting.[4] When children adapt themselves to these standards it is more likely that they are following tested paths and imitating the behavior of elders; especially those paths certified by their ancestors as their sure ways toward flourishing of life. When they adopt or adapt to a particular pattern of behavior pre-judged as productive or good by many, they have freed themselves from the more meticulous process of examining whether this pattern of behavior is good or not. It is the tendency of individuals to adopt ways that were already there before they were born or follow models who came before them, for better or for worse. These enduring ways have survived and will survive even after individuals die; these common and persistent mimetic behavior is regarded as necessary for survival as well as for social integration.

Wang Lung and O-lan are characters who only knew the possibilities which their traditional Chinese world

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branded as "inhuman" by the "second-nature humanity" which refers to the institution-mediated status of adult humanity; but, this "second-nature humanity" is also referred to as the "inhuman" that colonizes and dehumanizes the first-nature humanity. See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time,* trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby *(*Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 1-7.

[4] What Gagnon and Simon (citing other authors, like Kenneth Burke and to some extent Erving Goffman) have referred to as the cultural, inter-personal and intra-psychic scripting is also relevant to our present discussion. See, John H. Gagnon and William Simon, *Sexual Conduct: The Social Sources of Human Sexuality*, second edition (London/New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction, 2005), 13ff, 290, 312ff.

could offer and inform them.[5] Kunta Kinte, before he fell victim to slave traders, could only think of security in the familiar age-old traditions of the Mandinka tribe.[6] The pursuits and triumphs of Okonkwo have also been clearly cut out for him by the traditional Igbo culture of Nigeria.[7]

Conflicts and struggles are also overlaid by the traditions embodied by many and these would equip individuals to maneuver for their shares of what they think the world offers to people. Mahasweta Devi has illustrated this in her stories about tribal societies in West Bengal.[8] She tells about a hunting tribe who would "come out of the forest, go to the village market, place honey, leaves, roots, flowers, and silently take away whatever they need: rice, oil, spices."[9] They have no concept of money, but the mainstream culture has; they are branded as thieves ("inhuman"?) by the dominant culture's imposition of commercial rules. The absence of common axis or lines of relationship (kinship, shared worldview, sympathy, etc.) precludes a more promising bond of solidarity between the tribal and mainstream societies. Because of the absence of a common measure between the hunting tribe's and mainstream culture's market transactions, bonds indispensable to solidarity or mutual-relations are generally wanting.

The truth is that subjects are helplessly thrown, without them knowing or willing it, into the lap of their parents; and, consequently, into their environment and their world that is full of "things out there" which are

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[5] See Pearl S. Buck, *The Good Earth* (New York: Pocket Books, 1953).

[6] See Alex Haley, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1976).

[7] See Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1994).

[8] Mahasweta Devi, *Imaginary Maps* (London/New York: Routledge, 1995).

[9] Ibid., xiii.

considered necessary objects in the formation of ways of looking, feeling, thinking, acting, or appreciating. Such "things" include knowledge, beliefs, values, speech, language, images, social roles, models of behavior, patterned practices or rituals.

An American born in China could not avoid learning Chinese or using chopsticks; a Filipino born in the Bicol region will most likely become fond of chili peppers and coconut milk; an Ilokano would not dislike eating the edible beetle. These are not conscious choices but largely unconscious and automatic habits, acquired through the usual socializations and cultural dispositions that surround and shape individuals.

The subjects' parents' or elders' world is where they find things that amaze, threaten, surprise, attract, challenge, frustrate, enliven, or stir desires. Passing through various stages of identity development, subjects eventually form part of that world and its effects on consciousness. Subjects unconsciously *and sometimes* consciously apprehend it and make it their own world; even at the expense of losing touch with their personal drives. In some cultures, for example, individuals follow their elders' choice of marriage partners. Some cultures even prescribe how people should smile or laugh or chew their food or spit their saliva or wipe their face or express satisfaction and dissatisfaction.

It is into the elders' world where subjects integrate themselves with the rest of other beings; more or less. Infants, therefore, could only follow the procedures which culture-defined idea of maturity or humanity has traditionally prescribed for them. Some cultures define maturity as being more embedded into one's tribe; others would define it as greater individual differentiation or autonomy. One has to be initiated into every practice that culture has deemed acceptable in the areas of eating, defecating, and even reproducing. In the realm of sex, the

post-partum taboo and the *ius primae noctus* or later *droit du seigneur* used to be norms in some simple societies.[10] Individuals had to conform to such things. To paraphrase Chesterton: Tradition would be the dictatorship of the dead.

There are many objects in the outside world that impact on subjects. From different levels of apprehension or experience, subjects are overwhelmed by their density. Still, depending on one's vulnerability and resistance, such objects eventually spell out the language with which identity can be described.

The Other Formative Objects

There are a variety of "other objects" that can influence or shape individuals into someone else. In a social enclave we can talk about individuals raised into the sort of inter-generational taste and manners. A royal family reproduces and perpetuates its royal taste and manners through royal customs and protocols; a working class clan immortalizes its own workers' taste and manners through its dutiful and loyal progenies.[11] It is possible, however, for some individuals coming from a social group to acquire another group's ways, values, or lifestyles—simply because they have also exposed themselves to the latter's "other objects" that gave shape to "other forms of manners". While some children of prostituted women may become professionals because of their avoidance of pimps and their exposure to some influential social workers and educators, some children of respectable leaders may, because of exposure to "dangerous elements in society", become delinquents and

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[10] See http://www.snopes.com/weddings/customs/droit.asp/, accessed July 16, 2007.

[11] See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (London: Routledge, 1984).

later on become influential to a multitude of "other people" themselves.

The objects of the world are comprehended as facts; and as facts, they are important to subjects. But before subjects recognize objects as palpable "something," such objects have already acted upon them. Being exposed to objects is being exposed to their effects on subjects. One cannot think of being proactive without being "pro-acted" upon by other things.

First, because of the position of objects relative to that of subjects, the latter have conditioned themselves to a certain way of looking. For instance, it is not difficult to see why most people look at the sky (or the symbolic world) as something "up there." This is because subjects are standing on a ground that is "lower" than the sky. However, if people look at their place and the sky's position against the background of the whole space called "universe," then the sky as "up there" and our ground as "below" are no longer determinate spaces. From the multiple indeterminate points in the universe, any place can either be "up there" or "below."

Second, being in this world means also reproducing the patterns set by the mainstream culture (or by sub-cultures of boors and Fallstaffs). Cultural patterns are there "outside us;" but eventually, also forming "inside us." This process of internalization or enculturation may be less complicated in the context of simple indigenous tribes of Philippine hinterlands or small barrios dependent on simple farming or fishing; but, not as smooth in more complex urbanized settings where so many cases of "explosive" personalities, multiple identities, or unintegrated individuals appear. The still intact conventional road to internalization of those socio-cultural elements "outside us" is the reason why it is so easy for *most* individuals living in traditional contexts to experience the congruence between their ways of feeling,

thinking, and acting on one hand, with the expectations set before them by a still solid socially-transmitted culture on the other hand.[12] This does not mean, however, that culture is monolithic or that personal attitudes or behavior eternally constant. Neither is the process of internalization that simple; especially when the process of individualization takes place within complex settings.

Third, cultural patterns handed down by previous generations can still be considered "treasure" by *the many*. These are the objects that form an identified heritage—a living repository of what are considered as necessary, valuable, indispensable, or meaningful. They confer/impose important collective traits/behaviors or marks that make or show subjects who they are or who should they be. Many times, these common behavioral traits or customs are forced on subjects like obligations (i.e., quasi-obligatory). Social expectations make a powerful pressure on every subject who is often caught in conformity or forced into submission albeit subconsciously. Social pressure is powerful because they are coterminous with necessary relationships. They, more or less, lose their power when subjects acquire more external and internal space, thereby, gaining more autonomy, allowing them to become more critical to conventions; saying goodbye to previous dependencies while saying "hello" to new ones. Some successful women from Africa, like the supermodels Iman and Waris Dirie,

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[12] In a communication process, the shared physical world as well as the internalized information or world-aspects of culture bring about better understanding among conversation partners. They are said to be in a high-context communication. There is not much need to verbalize through explicit codes what are already embedded in their worlds. On the other hand, two conversation partners who do not share contexts may have to be more explicit with their transmitted codes to bring about greater understanding. The latter are said to be in a low-context communication. See Edward T. Hall, *Beyond Culture* (New York: Anchor Books, 1977), p. 91.

have been campaigning against the customary practice of genital mutilation; career women in Shanghai, Dongguan, and Chengdu have more power than their counterparts of ancient China against the traditional practice of husbands keeping concubines.[13] Mahasweta Devi and Vandana Shiva have enjoyed some prestige and power amidst India's patriarchal and discriminatory customs (versus women and tribals) because of their education and middle class positions.[14]

Men and women of every culture cannot avoid being surrounded (or colonized) by the culture into which they are thrown; a culture which is more or less alive with their surviving culture bearers. Even if personal choice is involved, the determining aspects of a living tradition, no matter how weak, will still frame every decision. Thus, some intentions and decisions that are made in connection with economic production or commercial exchange will also be colored by the more generalized influence of culture.

Culture becomes especially more prominent when interactions framed within a local setting are informed by shared beliefs, rituals, and traditional forms of organization. In simple or tribal societies, the congruence between economic production/exchange and the age-old cultural traditions may still be operative. Thus, the strictly rationalized calculated transactions common to urban capitalist settings (cf. fixed prices or quid pro quo transactions) may seem strange to the indigenous Mandaya tribe of Southern Philippines whose shared

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[13] See Don Lee, "Revival of the Concubines Stirs Trouble in China," *Los Angeles Times,* December 4, 2005, in http:// www.boston.com/news/world/asia/articles/2005/12/04/revival_of_the_ concubines_stirs_trouble_in_china/accessed August 17, 2007.

[14] Cf. Anees Jung, *Unveiling India: A Woman's Journey* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1988); *Beyond the Courtyard: A Sequel to Unveiling India* (New Delhi: Viking, 2003).

idea of reciprocity or mutual-help informs their practices of exchange. For a Mandaya, it is not a problem that their culture will give a local twist to some capitalist practices. What turns out to be more problematic is when capitalistic interests and means-end rationalization subordinate or suppress a Mandaya's expectations of mutual help or solidarity. Some small-scale commercial transactions may, however, fit into the more traditional/cultural trading patterns which may begin with the seller's assessment of the buyer's capacity to pay and may pass through the haggling stage, and may end with either withdrawal of the buyer or completion of a deal. Hidden in the seller's assessment of a buyer's modest capacity is the appropriate price adjustment based on fellow-feeling and not strictly based on business. This regard for the other's lowly status is generously allowed by the tradition of *pakikipagkapwa* (fellow-feeling); fixed-price scheme will only allow it in the presence of an explicit rational or calculative justification (for "on sale", defective, or promotional items).

Subordination of *Pakikipagkapwa* Tradition: Formation's Misfortune

Culture does figure out in the fields of politics or political games. Where different personalities struggle for places and positions, cultural elements may still be identified. These elements, as cultural capital, are pursued by well-meaning civil servants or by opportunists who seek for external goods[15] such as honor,

[15] For the interior and exterior goods classification, see Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*. "MacIntyre believes that politics should be a practice with internal goods, but as it is now it only leads to external goods. Some win, others lose; there is no good achieved that is good for the whole community; cheating and exploitation are frequent, and this damages the community as a whole. (MacIntyre has changed his

prestige, and recognition. Children, especially in the early years of formation, are *like* sponges, absorbing much information around them, especially those coming from the significant others,[16] models, and social media's so-called "influencers". When elders manipulate objects or values to suit their interests, these do not escape the attention of young learners whose minds are exceptionally impressionable.[17] Later on, they will make sense of these learning experiences, for better or for worse.

When a complex system of state-management practices and their organizing rules puts pressure on a whole society, it could subordinate or curtail the influence of *pakikipagkapwa* traditions (with their manifold rituals and practices included) which function in consolidating and enlivening a people (cf. the non-commercial healings performed by native healers-moral teachers who are branded as "quacks"). In urbanized capitalist settings which are, in general, more secularized than many traditional settings, the people's attitudes and behavior will not be predominantly marked by the traditions of simple societies. Instead, they are influenced by the processes of liberal-capitalism (embodied by profit-makers/takers) which consistently revolve around the structures of private ownership,

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terminology since *After Virtue*. He now calls internal goods "goods of excellence," and external goods are now called "goods of effectiveness.)" "Political Philosophy of Alasdair MacIntyre," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, https://iep.utm.edu/p-macint/ (accessed 4 August 2020)

[16] See, Lavinia Gomez, *An Introduction to Object Relations Theory* (London: Free Association Press, 1997).

[17] Albert Bandura and D. McClelland, *Social Learning Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977); see, Seok Hyun Gwon and Suyong Jeong, "Concept Analysis of Impressionability Among Adolescents and Young Adults," *NursingOpen*, 5/4 (October 2018)**:** 601-610.

profit-making, and remunerated work. Thus, the customary *pakikipagkawa* community work based on *bayanihan*[18] does not figure out in the bureaucrat-capitalists' plans and corporate management styles. Similarly, the sharing of food among neighbors in rural areas could not be practiced by owners of restaurants or fast food outlets where cash is always required. Some people, however, may share their resources with *their friends* while they are in those cash-demanding fields.

Of multitudes, capitalistic market-economic structures have configured everyday life and have transformed societies as centers of production, commerce, and spending/consumption. It is not altogether an anomalous claim to speak of a "capitalist culture" which has gained some ascendancy and regularity, learned and shared by peoples as workers and consumers, handed down from one generation to the next generation, and quasi-obligatory to everyone who is integrated into the system. It is in this pervasive sense that the dominant male-instituted capitalist culture penetrates every personal process or project of integration; especially as more and more persons and environments are shaped by the requirements of capitalist work and market exchange (and consequently reproduce a capitalist culture). This will happen when a uni-dimensional market-economic system subordinates or colonizes complex lifeworlds; and, in the process, attains preeminence over the broader and more integrative cultural systems. Transformed according to the efficiency-expectations of utilitarian or means-end reasoning, the physical world will showcase fields or areas that exponentially multiply instrumental or quid pro quo relations. The use and exertion of

[18] *Bayanihan* is a combination of two words, *bayan* (nation or town) and *anihan* (harvest)—it means neighbourhood work or community work done voluntarily and without monetary compensation.

knowledge and information to normalize relations also characterize present-day social processes. Political power nowadays is said to be characterized by its use of knowledge/power. Legislations that serve to create some "desirable" dispositions in citizens would follow the paths established by power/knowledge.[19]

A senior citizen who is visibly suffering from a debilitating illness has handed a doctor's prescription to one of the store attendants in one of the Mercury Drug Store outlets in Marikina City. The store attendant informs the senior buyer that the latter could not avail himself of the senior-citizens' discount since the prescription note did not bear the name of the patient. The poor man explodes with expletives against the strict application of the formal requirements of commerce and the law. With his trembling body and his contorted face revealing pain, he holds on to the shoulders of the other buyers, walks away slowly and leaves the store, extremely disappointed and furious over the subordination of fellow-feeling under the drug-store's observance of the formal requirements of commerce founded on laws or science.

Conclusion

Young individuals' or learners' encounters with others are not only about meeting people but also about exposure to other "objects" that go with such encounters, like social predispositions toward everyday civil formality, pursuit of goods considered as shared sources of prestige, confusing notions of right or wrong, or the

[19] See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin Books, 1977); Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, "Intellectuals and Power," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, edited by D.F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 205-216.

banality of indecency and corruption. There is no assurance that automatic help will flow from among the bystanders when someone falls flat on the ground, half-dead or half-alive. Impressionable characters are shaped when exposed to such encounters which are reproductions of what have been learned by grown-ups.

Even the private aspects of people's lives, like intimacy and sexual orientation, are framed by culture or a capitalist "culture." Culture, no matter how complex it becomes, is always that "web" (or complex of webs), or "canopy," or "cage," or "conscience," or "resource," configuring, to a great degree, every thought one produces, every affect one invests, or every decision one makes. This also takes for granted the complexity and variety of forms or dimensions of socio-cultural determinations—including the culture behind today's populism/s that have risen against the claims, posturing, inconsistencies, and contradictions of mainstream or elitist education, religion, economics, and politics.

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