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PEOPLE’S MYSTICISM AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT:
THE PROPHETIC CHARACTER OF THE NAZARENO IMAGE

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Introduction

A few days after the New Year’s Eve celebration, when the holiday’s festivity seems to be normalizing, another grand feast is celebrated by millions of Filipino Catholics. This is the feast of the traslacion of the Mahal na Poong Nazareno.\(^1\) The traslacion refers to the annual procession of the statue of the Black Nazarene from Luneta Grandstand to Quiapo Church every January 9. Millions of people join this event including devotees, spectators, and even foreign observers. Year after year, there are people who get injured or sometimes even die during the event and yet the eagerness of these devotees seems to remain unmitigated all these years.\(^2\)

The author, who is an external observer, is oftentimes amazed every time he encounters the expressions of faith of the devotees. He has a strong admiration for their dedication and commitment in exercising their faith publicly. Yet, for

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\(^{1}\) The image of the Black Nazarene of Quiapo has the official name of Nuestro Padre Jesus Nazareno but it is also colloquially called as Mahal na Poong Nazareno, Ang Itim na Nazareno, or simply Ang Nazareno.

several occasions, the author has also encountered people who criticize the authenticity of this faith expression especially when they see what is happening during the traslacion. Some of these critical eyes come from his college students in theology who predominantly come from well-off families. They are having a hard time in understanding how the devotees peculiarly express their faith, different from what they are accustomed to in the mainstream Catholic liturgies. For some, the devotees’ procession seems to be a mere pandemonium of people pushing each other in order to come near and touch the Nazareno image. It does not make sense to a non-devotee why people would do such thing and even risk their own life. Some students have asked the author: Why do they have to do that when they can just pray to God directly, celebrate Mass, or do the traditional Church-sanctioned practices? Why do some people even need to die just to perform their panata or devotional vow whereas they can express their faith without taking that perilous risk?

Outsider-observers and critics can really have a hard time grasping the mysticism of the common people which sometimes they even perceive as idolatrous (Lozada). It would really be easier to judge and discount the devotees’ faith expression as a remnant of old pagan practices because it is more tedious to take a serious look at this devotion and discern how the working of the Spirit of God is present in it. In today’s era of the Church’s new evangelization, consecutive Papal teachings have consistently affirmed the significant role of popular piety in the lives of the faithful, especially the poor. In Evangelii Nuntiandi, Pope Paul VI commented on popular piety:

It manifests a thirst for God which only the simple and poor can know. It makes people capable of generosity and sacrifice even to the point of heroism, when it is a question of manifesting belief. It involves an acute awareness of profound attributes of God: fatherhood, providence, loving and constant presence. It engenders interior attitudes rarely observed to the same degree elsewhere: patience, the sense of the cross in daily life, detachment, openness to others, devotion. (48)

For Pope John Paul II, popular piety is:
... an expression of faith which avails of certain cultural elements proper to a specific environment which is capable of interpreting and questioning in a lively and effective manner the sensibilities of those who live in that same environment. Genuine forms of popular piety, expressed in a multitude of different ways, derives from the faith and, therefore, must be valued and promoted (qtd. in Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments 4).

The same Pontiff commissioned the Congregation for Divine Worship to work on a Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy which aims to cultivate a positive and encouraging pastoral stance towards popular piety, valuing its major importance in conserving the faith of the Christian people. Meanwhile, Pope Benedict XVI, in his 2007 opening address to Fifth General Council of the Bishops of CELAM in Aparecida, Brazil, called popular piety as “a precious treasure of the Catholic Church” (qtd. in Mother of the Americas Institute). The said general council was able to produce a very important document that highlights the significance of popular piety. The same document will later be quoted in the encyclical of Pope Francis called, Evangelii Gaudium. Here, Pope Francis once more recognized the rightful place of popular piety as a legitimate expression of the Christian faith.

The Pope writes:

Underlying popular piety, as a fruit of the inculturated Gospel, is an active evangelizing power which we must not underestimate: to do so would be to fail to recognize the work of the Holy Spirit. Instead, we are called to promote and strengthen it, in order to deepen the never-ending process of inculturation. Expressions of popular piety have much to teach us; for those who are capable of reading them, they are a locus theologicus which demands our attention, especially at a time when we are looking to the new evangelization. (Francis 126)

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Cognizant of these Papal teachings on the significant role of popular piety, which is also known as people’s mysticism or popular spirituality, this paper attempts to contribute one approach in strengthening the theological significance of the devotion to the Nazareno in order to see how the Gospel of Christ could further permeate the lives of the Filipino people.

Millions of Filipino Catholics consider themselves as devotees of the Nazareno. This devotion has already been practiced in the Philippines for centuries. It is a unique cultural facet of Filipino Catholicism being one of the deeply ingrained folk devotions in the country. It is, therefore, one of the most important loci for doing theology in the Filipino context being a concrete expression of the faith of many Filipino Catholics.

In this article, the author contends that the devotion to the Nazareno has the potential of leading the people into transformative praxes. The discipline called Public Theology is deemed by the author as relevant and helpful in the pursuit of connecting popular spirituality to public life. Levesque describes Public Theology as a discipline that evolved from Political Theology. However, unlike Political Theology that dialogues only with Government and Economic Structures, Public Theology adds Civil Society as one of its dialogue partners (Levesque 39). Since civil society is a crucial element in the development of any nation, it is imperative that they would be actively involved. Most of the adherents of the Nazareno belong to the civil society group. Thus, in harnessing the devotion’s theological significance, it is indispensable to involve the public dimension of this faith expression. For Bromell, Public Theology is “critical thinking, with others, about religious faith and public life” (n. pag). Public Theology therefore can help critically analyse the practices in the devotion, reflect anew on its theological significance, and uncover its socio-political implications.

What is one aspect of the devotion that can be highlighted in order to demonstrate this proposition? This study highlights the image of the Nazareno which serves as the rallying point of the devotion. How do devotees view this image? What do they see when they look up to it? How does it affect them? How can a faith-seeking-understanding (theological) perspective further enhance their given views? And how will it connect to their own lives and their public exercise
of the faith? To respond to these inquiries, this paper utilizes the Pastoral Cycle of see-discern-engage as its methodology. First, there will be a presentation of some pertinent data gathered about the devotion to the Nazareno and an analysis of it; second, there will be a theological reflection on the image of the Nazareno and how it relates to the Filipino context; and third, there will be a provisional conclusion where opportunities for engagement are identified. The ultimate aim of this study is to recognize a probable relationship between the devotion to the Nazareno and the public exercise of the faith. However, it is not part of its scope to delve into how the devotees must engage in specific political matters. This would require another article or even an entire book and a thorough analysis through the aid of social sciences which is beyond the expertise of the author. This article intends to provide a modest theological contribution that enables a popular spirituality “to be vitally related to Filipino life, and serve the cause of full human development, justice, peace, and the integrity of creation” (Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, “Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines” 175).

1. The Nazareno Image: Center of People’s Mysticism

The image of the Black Nazarene serves as the rallying point of the devotion. This image arrived in the Philippines through a galleon ship from Mexico. Msgr. Vengco, Jr. of the Loyola School of Theology contends that the dark complexion of the image is due to its mesquite wood material used by the original sculptor (de Guzman). Hence, it was not intentional that the image has a dark complexion. Nonetheless, this complexion can arguably take a significant political implication of the image.

The veneration of the image of the Nazareno was recognized by Pope Innocent X in 1650. In 1880, Pope Pius VII gave his Apostolic Blessing which granted plenary indulgence to those who will devoutly pray before it.\(^4\) Several

centuries have passed and still the devotion of many Filipinos to the Nazareno has continued to flourish.\(^5\)

In a casual interview with a member of the Hijos de Nazarenos, the respondent narrates his conversion experience where he claims that initially he was sceptical about the devotion until he tried to immerse in the devotion itself and saw how it has affected his faith and his life. He described how he experienced miracles given by the Nazareno. He particularly recalled two separate incidents. One was during his participation in a traslacion. Someone among the devotees offered bread and water for him and he jokingly said that he preferred a hot lugaw.\(^6\) They walked few steps further; he was surprised to see a nearby house offering the devotees a hot lugaw for free. He said he was so astounded by this experience. Some of his fellow hijos told him not to joke with the Nazareno because he will take one’s challenge seriously. On another occasion the same respondent recalls a prayer-request for a new car to be granted to him. He said all his life his money goes to the needs of his family. And now that they are more stable financially, he asked the Nazareno to grant him a new car, just a simple one that is air-conditioned. A few months after, his brother-in-law sold him his car in a very reasonable price. The interviewee, recalling these events, pointed out that for one to really appreciate the devotion to the Nazareno, one has to try to join the devotion and practice it personally. It may seem to be shallow for others but not until you become a devotee will you understand what it means for them.\(^7\) This is probably what Cardinal Tagle meant when he said, “To understand the devotee you have to be a devotee. Only a devotee could best understand a devotee” (Lagarde).

But not all people appreciate this ardent devotion to the Nazareno. There are detractors who accuse the Nazareno devotees of idolatry. There were several


\(^6\) Lugaw is a colloquial term for congee or a hot soup of rice with either chicken or pork and tofu.

\(^7\) This data comes from a casual interview the author conducted with a member of Hijos de Nazarenos. Regino, Arnold, Interview by the author, Personal Interview, Ateneo de Manila Grade School Campus Ministry Office, October1, 2016.
occasions wherein some non-Catholic preachers attended the *traslacion* in order to convince the devotees that what they are doing is against the will of God (Lozada). Cognizant of this critique, it is imperative to affirm the instruction of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines: “We must have the courage to correct what leads to fanaticism or maintains people infantile in their faith. We must not give members of other faiths reason for impugning the true faith” (Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, “Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines” 175). Therefore, it must be acknowledged that devotees and non-devotees alike must be given an adequate catechetical instruction about the image of the *Nazareno*, which it is not supposed to be an object of worship.

Professor Calano of the Ateneo de Manila University asserts that since the image represents Jesus, the Incarnate Word of God, the image serves as a conduit for transcendental and religious experience. It provides an embodied point of contact with the divine (169). According to Michael Amaladoss, “a symbol is useful only insofar as it leads us to go deeper into the reality that it symbolizes. It has played its role well when it makes us aware that the reality transcends it in its individuality and depth. The symbol then becomes an icon that leads us to the contemplation of the mystery it indicates” (4-5). The devotion to the *Nazareno* transcends the image and leads the devotee to Christ who is the image’s prototype. It then serves as an icon that provides an indispensable help for authentic Christian piety (Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, “Catechism for Filipino Catholics” 892). It is in this sense that the devotion should be understood and upheld.

2. The Prophetic Character of the *Nazareno* Image

Msgr. Ignacio, who served as the rector of the Minor Basilica of the Black Nazarene, attests to how devotees are being Christified as they look more to the image of Christ, the *Nazareno* (41). Now, our hope is that this transformation in the devotees may lead as well to the transformation of the Philippine society. How can the *Nazareno* be tapped in order for this vision to materialize? This paper
proposes that by uncovering the prophetic character of the Nazareno, it will be able to serve as an inspiration for the devotees to actively and critically involve themselves in public affairs that will lead to social transformation.

According to the Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, there are two interconnected tasks of the prophetic ministry, namely “criticism” and “energizing” (14). Brueggemann, following the idea of Dorothee Soelle, suggests that prophetic criticism involves enabling people to become aware of their restlessness, grievances, and cries and summoning them to protest against those who pretend to be numb to their laments. Prophets denounce what is wrong and unjust in the present order of things. Prophetic energizing, on the other hand, means conveying alternative realities from the shady status quo. It entails giving a message of hope for a better order of realities (Brueggemann 22-23). Prophets, therefore, do not only denounce injustice but they also announce a message of hope. These two intertwined tasks of criticizing and energizing are what I propose as the prophetic character that the Nazareno image conveys. My hypothesis is that this realization has the potential to instigate and sustain devotees in actively and critically engaging in matters that affect their lives and that of the Filipino people.

Schillebeeckx’s notion of negative contrast experience can further highlight this prophetic character of the Nazareno image. The term negative contrast experience pertains to human experiences of injustice, oppression, and suffering that lead to remonstration and call for active transformation (“God the Future of Man” 155-156). According to Kevin Considine, these experiences are revelatory because they bring to our awareness the prevailing injustices in the world within the purview of human experience (48). This leads to a kind of awareness that obliges people to work against the underlying causes of suffering and work for the promotion of flourishing of life and liberation. It could be said that this understanding of the negative contrast experience is analogous to the prophetic role of criticizing. Meanwhile, Kathleen McManus noted that for Schillebeeckx, the experience of suffering makes people capable of envisioning a better future (64). It generates a sense of hope that inspires people to work for something different. Thus, the human aspiration of life in its fullness, i.e. salvation, manifests in human consciousness as contrast of the concrete experiences of
suffering. This view of the negative contrast experience is analogous to the prophetic role of energizing. Therefore, it could be asserted that negative contrast experiences take on a prophetic character (Sison, “The Prophetic-Liberating Schillebeeckx: Reclaiming a Western Voice for the Third World” 60). With this idea, the author argues that the Nazareno, being a depiction of the negative contrast experience of Jesus of Nazareth, can be understood as a bearer of the prophetic character that criticizes injustice and at the same time energizes hope for a better future.

The Nazareno image portrays a suffering Jesus on his way to Calvary. He is in a semi-kneeling position which indicates his effort to rise up after a fall due to the heavy cross that he carries. Looking on his face, eyes, and mouth, one can see a person who is suffering terribly (Aguinaldo, “A Study on Filipino Culture: The Devotion to the Black Nazarene of Quiapo” 22). However, despite the image’s portrayal of suffering, it ironically wears a royal vestment with detailed golden embroideries and there are golden rays emanating from its head (Calano 169). The image shows contrasting elements. In relation to the negative experience of contrast, how can these elements be understood?  

To see the image as a dramatic representation of the negative contrast experience of Jesus reveals the reality of injustice in our world that victimizes innocent people including the Incarnate Son of God himself. This realization can bring into the consciousness of the devotees the prophetic character of Jesus’ contrast experience. The depiction of a person trying to rise up after a fall together with the contrasting elements of a royal vestment with golden embroideries, the rays emanating from its head vis-à-vis the image’s clear portrayal of a suffering human can be understood as presentations of the enduring presence of human dignity even in the midst of suffering.  

This can serve as an inspiration to the devotees who experience different sorts of suffering. It sends a message that despite of their suffering, their dignity as children of God remains intact just like

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8 I propose a perspective in understanding the image that is slightly different from the traditional interpretations. See http://www.quiapochurch.com/index.php/about/nuestro-padre-jesus-nazareno, accessed July 15, 2016.

9The author owes this notion to Eric Borgman, a Dutch Theologian from the University of Tilburg who specializes in the theology of Edward Schillebeeckx.
the Nazareno. However, it can also send a message of resistance to oppression that compromises their inherent dignity. This opposition to oppression could be further inspired by the hope that amid suffering, a better future in God is possible. Devotees can draw energy and encouragement from this as they commit themselves to transformative socio-political actions instigated and sustained by their hope for a better Philippines.

Contrast Experiences in the Filipino Context

To have a well-grounded appreciation of this theological reflection in a Filipino context, Schillebeeckx’s notion of negative contrast experience must be linked with the Filipino perspective. Here, the contrasting concepts of hirap (difficulty, suffering) and ginhawa (relief, well-being) will be helpful in further reflecting the notion of contrast experiences. For the devotees of the Nazareno, the contrast experience depicted by the image is a familiar day to day companion. The Nazareno portrays the hirap of Jesus as he agonizingly carries his cross but it also depicts ginhawa in its glorious vestment and the rays that emanate from its head. Likewise, many of the devotees also undergo hirap and ginhawa. Devotees perform their devotion to seek help from the Nazareno for the suffering that they or their loved ones endure. For others, their devotion is a sign of their gratitude for an experience of ginhawa due to an answered prayer given by the Nazareno.

According to the Filipino theologian Jose de Mesa, ginhawa is the Filipino counterpart of provisional salvation as opposed to the contrast experience of suffering (“Making Salvation Concrete and Jesus Real Trends in Asian Christology”). Similar to Schillebeeckx’s notion, de Mesa, together with Wostyn, contends that “salvation is, in fact, a contrast experience. The human search for well-being is always in contrast with its opposite: a history of suffering, misery, oppression and misfortune. It is mainly the negative experience of contrast which marks out the ideas and expectations of salvation” (“Doing Christology: The Re-Appropriation of a Tradition” 36). Ginhawa is construed thereof as “fragmentary
experiences of salvation in the here and now, but in view of an eschatological vision of complete well being [sic.], thus far, conceivable as a negative awareness” (Sison, “Screening Schillebeeckx: Theology and Third Cinema in Dialogue” 152). Ginhawa concretizes salvation as well-being within historical experience but since life within history is both imperfect and finite, the experience of ginhawa will always be inchoate. It will remain to be interwoven with hirap. That is why the conception of ginhawa is always a contrast experience of hirap within history (Sison, “Screening Schillebeeckx: Theology and Third Cinema in Dialogue” 152).

This reality posts a call to devotees to participate with the Nazareno in bringing ginhawa for others in the midst of this world filled with hirap. Devotees freely embrace hirap in performing their devotional panata (vow) in order that people they love might experience ginhawa. Yet, the invitation remains for them to extend their participation in bringing ginhawa for others to the larger Filipino society. They can realize this by actualizing the prophetic character of the Nazareno—i.e. by actively engaging in public affairs, criticizing injustice, and energizing hope for a transformed Filipino society. Obviously, hirap may not be extirpated by the once in a while experiences of ginhawa. And yet, it is through the experience of hirap which one freely bears for the sake of love and solidarity with the suffering, that devotees see a deeper meaning and appreciation of the ginhawa-bringer (the Nazareno himself), the ginhawa that he brings, and the lubos na ginhawa (total wellbeing) that they hope and strain for.

3. Engaging One’s Faith in the Nazareno in Public Affairs

The awareness of the prophetic signification of the image of the Nazareno is meant to generate greater consciousness among the devotees of their role as co-prophets of the Nazareno by virtue of their baptism and, of course, their devotion to him. This will hopefully lead to their concrete response in the form of personal commitment to the causes of social justice, the common good, and flourishing of life and expressed in their active engagement in socio-political matters. It thereby
empowers the devotees, who predominantly come from the marginalized sector of the Philippine society, to actively engage their faith in the public arena and participate in various transformative actions. Thus, performing the devotion not only for their immediate benefits or for the sake of their kin but also for the sake of the entire Filipino society.

There are numerous political, social, and economic problems that Filipinos face today. As of this moment, there are already more than 6,700 recorded killings since the present government declared “war on drugs” in our country (Bueza). However, the rising numbers of killings is just one among the many pressing issues in the Philippines. To further name a few, there are the perennial problems of poverty and injustice, poor health care system, lack of equitable opportunities for decent job that compels many Filipinos to work abroad, daily heavy traffic which made us one of the worst places to drive on earth according to Waze (Tan) and the devastating super typhoons and other natural calamities that hit us periodically. Given the myriad of these social ills, the devotee sought to play a vital role in exercising their faith publicly in order to serve the common good and help alleviate the suffering of their fellow Filipinos. They must critically collaborate with the government and other publics in these efforts. However, in order for them to dutifully perform their prophetic role of criticizing and energizing they must be credible witnesses of the gospel values. As Pope Paul VI once said, ”Modern man [sic.] listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he [sic.] does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses” (41).


