Young People and the Challenges of Religious Education in the Philippines

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The Augustinian missionaries set up the very first school in the Philippines in 1565,\(^1\) thus, the country has been home to Catholic educational institutions for at least 400 years.\(^2\) Today, there are 1,500 Catholic schools around the Philippines and which should be considered no small accomplishment.\(^3\) Although this figure is relatively small compared to the total number of schools throughout the country (46,000 elementary and 13,000 secondary), many of these private Catholic educational institutions are considered highly at local, national and international levels.\(^4\)

\(^1\) Other reputable schools are run by Dominicans, Jesuits, Benedictines, Salesians, Vincentians, and the Christian Brothers. Women religious such as the Daughters of Charity, Assumption Sisters, and Sisters of St. Paul de Chartres have their educational institutions too. Dioceses around the country also run their respective parochial schools (cf. Y. Afuca – A. Castillo, “How Catholic is Your School: Perceptions on the Catholic Identity of the Unified Schools of the Archdiocese of Lipa (USA?),” De La Salle Lipa Journal of Multidisciplinary Research, vol. 3, 2016, n. 1, 28-40).


\(^4\) Cf. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION – RESEARCH AND STATISTICS DIVISION,
Some observers are convinced that Catholic schools are "beacons of hope" as far as "courageous renewal and conversion" are concerned. To this end, what makes Catholic schools distinct is their religious education, which is typically offered as Christian Living classes in elementary and junior high school. Though a significant commercial activity in its own right, religious education has to rely on textbooks produced by competing schools, where tuition is free, and the teaching of religion is offered only upon specific request of the child's parents or guardians.

Therefore, the question I intend to answer in this essay is as follows: As far as the youth are concerned, what are the challenges confronting religious education in Catholic schools in the country? I ask this question as a sociologist, for whom understanding at the outset the very context of young people is key to recognizing the gaps in present religious education. This sociological input can help teachers to understand why, "Catholic education is failing in the Philippines." In terms of pastoral work, this question is also important in pondering how the faith can remain accessible and applicable for Filipino Catholic youth. In context the total number of enrolled students in the Philippines is over 44 million in elementary and 7 million in secondary, yet many may not realize that even if 79.5 percent of Filipinos are Catholic by religious affiliation, only a very small minority have access to Catholic schools. In fact, the majority of students do not go to Catholic schools, with 94 percent of elementary and 80 percent of secondary students attending public schools with no specific religious affiliation.

As this chapter will seek to illustrate, religious education offered by Catholic schools in the Philippines has an increasingly fundamental issue to confront – its relevance. In this light, the problem of religious education is not only that it is considered boring, in which the implicit expectation is for students to memorize religious ideas as cold facts; but, there are also far bigger social contexts confronting religious education. It has to compete for space, time, and attention with other subjects that both parents and students might see as more valuable for later success in life. At the same time, it has to confront questions about religious diversity and changing moral worldviews. My sociological take is that for religious education to become a "beacon of hope," it needs to first comprehend its intended recipients, the Filipino youth.

In what follows, I first discuss the extensive literature on religious education in the Philippines. The latter part of the chapter will focus on the unique experiences of contemporary

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Filipino youth. These experiences present in their own right the challenges to religious education: the instrumentalization of education, religious diversity, and the emergence of what I call elsewhere as the Creative Catholics.\(^{10}\) The chapter ends by offering reflections on what could be done to enhance its relevance. Crucial in this regard is the difficult but noble cause of Catholic schools to become beacons of hope in Philippine society.

**Catholic Schools as Beacons of Hope**

All too often do commentators describe the Philippines as the only Catholic nation in Asia. This depiction is a mistake given that the state is secular and that the 1987 Constitution upholds religious freedom.\(^{11}\) Nevertheless, it is understandable why many commentators have arrived at such a statement considering the Catholic character of Philippine society; however, its moral contradictions bother these critics. Writing for the Manila Times, Ricardo Saludo claims, for example, that corruption “is the one nationwide scourge impacting major tenets of Christianity in the Philippines.”\(^{12}\) His piece enumerates specific instances of corruption that in his view ultimately destroy the environment and steal from the poor.


Not surprisingly, one reaction to Saludo’s piece places the blame on Catholic schools for failing to raise adults who reject corruption wholeheartedly. This explains why some educators themselves have felt the urge to reflect on where they may have gone wrong. In an article that went viral, teacher Simone Lorenzo suggests that Catholic education has failed because its teachers simply “measure students’ knowledge according to how well they memorize dogmas and exegetical theories.”\(^{13}\) This rote learning engenders a very uncritical attitude towards the Catholic faith, which compromises its relevance in everyday life and to complex moral concerns.

Certain scholars have raised similar concerns, for example: “Are Catholic schools making a difference in transforming Philippine society? What is the moral stance of the Catholic school graduates who are running the country?”\(^{14}\) To me the tone of these questions is problematic partly because they overlook an important fact: only a few students, as I have mentioned above, have access to a Catholic school. But at the same time, there is no denying that many leaders embroiled in corruption have in fact been educated at the most prestigious religious schools in the country. In recent years several top leaders, all Catholic-schooled, have been accused of corruption. No less than the president of the Catholic Education Association of the Philippines (CEAP) admitted that “it is really a cause for great concern.”\(^{15}\)


So, do Catholic schools, have a credible response? The ongoing debate in articles and books centers on what the core function of these schools should be. Which of the two should they be teaching: “To be religious in a Catholic way” or “(the Catholic) religion”?

Catholic religious education, in various Church documents, does not necessarily make a distinction between the two. After all, Catholic schools aim to have a comprehensive perspective of the person, of morality, of culture, and of social justice. The debate nevertheless is instructive. One side speaks of the need for religious education to stick to its core values and inspire faith. Others argue the contrary: it needs to assert its presence in the curriculum by focusing on its pedagogical value. Either way, the debate in general is a response to the precarious place of religious education in a highly secularized societies.

The Philippine case tends to be different. When Gutierrez proposes that Catholic schools could still be “beacons of hope” in the country, the reference point is neither secularization nor the methodological atheism of the classroom. In her view, the reference point has to do with social ills, and how the moral formation of students will guide their response once they become adults and influential leaders. The hope lies in their ability to respond to the political and economic crises of the country. Thus, the hope that Catholic schools offer is no longer just about resisting “the threat of domination of other faiths,” indeed, as the succeeding sections of his paper will show, religious diversification remains. But the indisputable task of Catholic schools today is to advance social transformation and the preferential option for the poor. The pressing burden of Catholic education, in other words, lies in forming “good citizens who can build the Filipino nation.”

But there is a caveat. Inasmuch as nation-building for Gutierrez is built in the hope of religious education, it might not be the case for Catholic graduates. This is my reading of the findings of a survey she administered among graduates of Catholic schools. While 44 percent of respondents valued most the “moral and character formation” at school, only 6 percent had the same attitude towards “social and civic responsibility.”

What is analytically interesting in the discussion that has emerged thus far is that for some scholars and religious leaders there seems to be a link between the perception that morality is declining and the many social ills of the Philippines. These social ills range from corruption to poverty and even environmental degradation. Moral decline is also linked to the liberal policies that, in the eyes of some church leaders, engender a “culture of death,” which is the acronym for “divorce, euthanasia, abortion, transsexuality, and homosexuali-

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20 Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, “Pastoral Letter on 400 Years of Catholic Education in the Philippines.”
21 A. Gutierrez, “Catholic Schools in the Philippines: Beacons of Hope in Asia,” 722.
22 Ibid., 26.
ty.” The root of all these social ills – and thus the biggest challenge confronting religious education – is the decline of morality. The logic traces the problem back to how globalization is accompanied by “secularization, materialism, and consumerism, which have often led to family breakdown and moral relativism.” Clearly, secularism is framed as a moral problem in the Philippines. Even young people in the Philippines cannot seem to escape this reality.

Quite noticeable about this framing is how different it is from the way secularism is qualified elsewhere. In the British education system, for example, secularism is the bracketing of doctrines and belief in God. In the Filipino context, the fundamental problem secularism poses upon religious education is the decline of morality. Does it emanate from weakening religiosity among Filipino Catholic youth? It does not if one relied on the findings of the National Filipino Catholic Youth Study which points to the strong religious identity of young people.

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Instead, this fear has to do with the assumption that Western values are eroding Filipino Catholic virtues. And so therefore, this is where the promise of religious education also lies: renewal.

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The Challenges of Religious Education

In my view, however, focusing on the decline of morality as the biggest challenge of religious education is analytically problematic. For one, Gutierrez’s survey above demonstrates that moral formation is considered as the most valued among graduates of Catholic schools. At the same time, the claim, while laudable in its concern, echoes a moral panic over a perceived decline of religiosity in the country. Based on this moral panic, it is not difficult to find oneself on the slippery slope of many other moral and social ills. This claim, however, is not empirically verifiable. It assumes that there was a pristine moral past during which Filipinos made choices based on coherent religious convictions. It thus neglects the fact that kinship patterns, communities, and values vary across the archipelago.

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31 P.J. Bräunlein, “‘We are 100% Catholic’: Philippine Passion Rituals and Some Obstacles in the Study of Non-European Christianity,” Journal of Religion in Europe, vol. 5, 2012, n. 3, 384-413.
My assessments deviate from this approach. In assessing the challenges of religious education, it is pertinent to remain close to the actual condition of religious education itself. Some observers, for example, have reflected on its pedagogy. The CBCP itself is bothered that the general perception of Catholic schools is that they are expensive and only for the wealthy. These are good angles that religious educators themselves can address. My take on this as a sociologist will focus instead on the social conditions of the youth that directly affect the classroom. This section will spell out three aspects for consideration: the instrumentalization of education, religious diversification, and the emergence of Creative Catholics. Although not exhaustive, these are important social contexts to assess how far religious education can become a “beacon of hope”.

Instrumentalization

Without government subsidy, Catholic schools are generally expensive. Thus, in the Philippines, enrolling in a private school is in itself an indicator of a family’s income status. But it is also aspirational. Sociologically speaking, Catholic schools are well placed in Philippine society to enhance life chances for “occupational and financial success.” One reason is that they have good facilities and lower teacher-student ratio. Some are also exclusive to either male or female students and very selective, which makes them prestigious. In this light, they are perceived to offer better education than typical public schools (or other non-sectarian private schools). Also in comparison, studies show that there is a gap between public and private school students in terms of motivation and achievement.

Today, the place Catholic schools in Philippine society occupy needs to be understood in context. Schools are vehicles for social mobility, and this in fact is a national policy. The recent reform that added two more years to basic Philippine education was partly justified by the need to be on par with the educational system of other countries. The assumption is that the reform will make Filipinos highly-skilled for the global labor market. This move is clearly neo-liberal which treats individuals as competitive products in and for themselves. Interestingly, Reyes asserts that neo-liberal reform for the sake of economic growth in the Philippines did not begin when the Philippines started exporting labor in the 1970s, instead it began in 1966 with education reform.

At the same time, the promise of social mobility is made by educational institutions themselves. It is not surprising to see tertiary institutions advertise their course offerings for the global market. In the 2000s, for example, the country wit-

35 S. Lorenzo, “Three Reasons Why Catholic Education is Failing in the Philippines... and Elsewhere.”
34 Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, “Pastoral letter on 400 years of Catholic Education in the Philippines.”
nessed the mushrooming of private colleges that met the global need for nurses and other medical practitioners. Some colleges even carried franchised names to make themselves more marketable in the provinces. State regulation, however, did not catch up fast enough, engendering the problem of standard institutions. It thus adds to the prestige of highly reputable Catholic schools to be able to send their graduates to the country’s top universities, some of which are also Catholic.

Such is the economic environment in which Catholic schools are embedded in the Philippines. It is not surprising therefore to encounter parents for whom Catholic education is more instrumental than it is religious. Catholic education, in other words, is valued “as a vehicle towards upward mobility in social status.” Put differently, the positive reputation of Catholic schools has less to do with their Catholic curriculum than with the impression that they afford better opportunities for students.

This impression calls into question the role of Catholic schools in providing religious education. Given the instrumental character of Catholic schools for success in life, Christian Living education becomes only an add-on. In other words, its utility becomes secondary to mainstream subjects. Relative to mathematics, science, and the other core subjects, religious education does not enjoy a significant amount of time and weight in the basic curriculum. The weak emphasis gives the impression to its students that it is unimportant.

In this regard, the biggest challenge then for Catholic schools (or any other religious educational institution for that matter) is how to remain true to their calling. The Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, in a pastoral letter, has recognized the tension between their calling and people’s instrumental expectations: Christian Education is not self-seeking. It is not given for the purpose of gaining power but as an aid towards a fuller understanding of life, and communion with man. Knowledge is not to be considered as a means of material prosperity and success, but as a call to serve and to be responsible for others.

**Religious Diversity**

The second social condition is religious diversity. To be certain, the Philippines remains predominantly Catholic, at least statistically speaking. The most recent census shows that religious affiliation to Catholicism enjoys still a large majority at 79.5 percent. Muslims constitute 6 percent of the population while followers of Iglesia ni Cristo (INC) and Evangelicals 2.6 percent and 2.4 percent, respectively. The rest of the population (9.4 percent) belongs to other religious affiliations.

However, relying only on these statistical data may give the impression that the Philippines is still homogeneous; however,

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31 That Catholic schools are elite might be true in cities like Manila, Cebu, Davao, and other urban centers around the country. However, not all Catholic schools are exclusive and elite. Run by dioceses, there are parochial schools catering to low-income families. These schools also offer alternative education to the public school system in the provinces.


33 Cf. CATHOLIC BISHOPS’ CONFERENCE OF THE PHILIPPINES, “Pastoral Letter on 400 Years of Catholic Education in the Philippines.”

34 Cf. PHILIPPINE STATISTICS AUTHORITY, “Philippine Population Surpassed the 100 Million Mark (Results from the 2015 Census of Population).”
this impression is of course misleading. Maintaining that the Philippines is a Catholic country is not only descriptive, it is also normative, based on which one views non-Catholics as an anomaly and sometimes even with treacherous biases. Diversity, after all, is “challenging, whether it is manifest in language differences or in modes of dress, eating, and socializing [...] When religion is involved, these challenges are multiplied.” In this light, it is important to map the other ways in which religious diversity is taking shape in the Philippines. To identify these developments has been my research agenda in recent years.

Religious diversification, for one, is a result of missionary work and conversion in the Philippines. The process of conversion takes on different modes. A few illustrations are called for:

- Megachurches like Christ Commission Fellowship and Victory Christian Fellowship are very aggressive when it comes to building satellite churches in urban areas. Sunday service are sometimes held in rented cinemas. In its 15 locations in Metro Manila alone, Victory, which follows structured discipleship programs, has 80,000 attendees at its 120 worship services, and at which many university students are converted.

- Foreign missionaries are present too, even building their own places of worship. It is not unusual to encounter missionaries at the worship halls of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints even in remote areas. Its headquarters is in Quezon City, which has a missionary training center that offers language programs in Man- darin, Mongolian, and Thai. This goes to show how the center is crucial to the expansion of the group in the country and the wider region. Its total church membership in the Philippines is almost 750,000, with 1,211 congregations.

- Alongside foreign missionaries who come to the Philippines are the international students who bring with them their respective religious traditions. Secondary and tertiary schools in the Philippines are fast becoming an alternative for students from India and South Korea, for example. They are forming their own communities in Manila and other urban centers.

- One can also consider conversion that takes place among Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs). There are around 2.2 million OFWs around the world. When they come back to the Philippines they bring with them their newfound faith. There is a perception that Filipinos are the lifeblood of ageing Catholic parishes in the West. But that as it may, conversion to other religions is also taking place among them, which could have an influence on relatives who have remained behind.


48 Cf. PHILIPPINE STATISTICS AUTHORITY, “Philippine Population Surpassed the 100 Million Mark (Results from the 2015 Census of Population).”

Apart from conversion, religious groups are making their presence felt in other ways. They are shaping the urban and political landscape of contemporary Philippine society. Let me highlight a few notable instances, one of which is in terms of political visibility. Jesus is Lord (JIL), a Christian megachurch, has been politically active for more than a decade now. JIL is among the biggest Evangelical groups in the world, with four million followers in 55 countries. Many of its members abroad are also Filipinos. Its founding pastor, Brother Eddie Villanueva, ran twice for president and once for senator but was unsuccessful in all attempts. His son, who is now a sitting senator, has, so to speak, fulfilled his father’s political ambitions. Brother Eddie’s political convictions can be traced back to his undergraduate days when he was a student activist. But these political involvements are not only personal; the church echoes its activities as acts “for God and country,” which incidentally is also the title of his television show. JIL’s political involvement rendered Evangelicals visible in the Philippines.

In a literal sense, diversity becomes visible through the architectural developments of religious groups. Iglesia ni Cristo (INC) is a prominent example. INC is among the world’s fastest-growing indigenous Christian churches. It has over two million members in more than 100 countries. Communities around the Philippines, even in far-flung areas, are dotted with INC’s unmistakable neo-gothic chapels. While it is growing among overseas Filipinos, it is also gaining traction among other nationalities, which explains its online presence and television programs in different languages like German, Mandarin, Portuguese, and Spanish. I have argued elsewhere that INC demonstrates religious worlding, which is about building projects that are not only global in standard but also in outlook. A prime example is the Philippine Arena, the world’s indoor stadium that can accommodate around 50,000 spectators. It was inaugurated at INC’s 100th anniversary in 2014. It is situated in Ciudad de Victoria, amidst a large complex of residences, hospital, and educational facilities all owned by INC.

Not all religious groups are financially capable of achieving similar feats; however, they too are making their presence visible by establishing their own physical communities. This is certainly the case for Muslims who have migrated to different urban centers in the Philippines. These migrants relocate for various reasons such as conflict in Mindanao. Domestic migra-


tion is also about looking for new livelihood opportunities. But here there is a caveat. In many instances the communities they form are informal. Even their livelihoods are associated with the informal sector such as the trading of second-hand gadgets and DVDs. It is indicative of the formation of the new underclass in urban areas like Manila. In fact, that they are the underclass is a consequence of how they are treated by other local communities.

These are just some of the large-scale developments in religious diversification in the Philippines today. My view is that these developments have an effect on the classroom. On one hand, it is about the very constitution of the student population itself, a trend which has been recognized previously in the Philippines. It is to be expected that even Catholic schools will have adherents of other religious groups. On the other hand, beyond these classrooms, one finds a plethora of religious contexts in which these students are growing up. This means that other religious groups might be statistically small but they are far from being invisible. They are involved in politics as much as they are in proselytization. They are also in a manner of speaking disrupting what were hitherto homoge-


neous public spaces. These realities are present even if only tacit in the consciousness of young people.

Should religious education do anything at all? There are two paths available for Catholic schools. One is to continue using Christian Living classes for catechetical instruction. It certainly has the goal of introducing and deepening the faith of Catholic students. The caveat though is that for non-Catholics it may only be an intellectual exercise. The other approach, which is not necessarily incompatible with the first, is to use the classroom’s diversity as a resource. Wuthnow’s insight on religious diversity in Christian America is instructive: “If a person’s best friend in elementary school belonged to a different religion, and if this person takes religion seriously, he or she will surely think about his or her faith differently than would have been the case if everyone in school belonged to the same religion.”

Clearly, the educator’s new concern is about navigating the complexity of religious diversity – whether in the classroom or society at large. Doing so is of course difficult. This is why I mentioned earlier the tension between teaching how to be religious and teaching the Catholic religion. But perhaps the fact of religious diversity does not have to be so daunting. In this light, Scott then proposes that teachers should not see themselves as catechists but as facilitators: “One does not teach orthodoxy. One does not teach dissent. One teaches the conversation to facilitate deeper understanding. The aim, then, is not to evoke a personal faith response from the student but to enable him or her to articulate their own convictions and, on educational grounds, evaluate the persuasiveness of the teach-

ings in his or her life. The practice of the religion is the concern of the student alone, not the teacher.  

\[\text{The Emergence of Creative Catholics}\]

In early 2013, the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Culture gathered among its ranks sociologists, bloggers, activists, and youth leaders to tackle "emerging youth cultures." Cardinal Ravasi, Head of the Council, confessed that young people have become "disconnected" from "unbearable social, political, and religious complexities." This disconnection, with the rise of unchurched individuals, is perhaps becoming clear in Western societies such as the US.  

The situation is considerably different in the Philippines, which tops other countries on various indicators of religiosity including belief in God and religious attendance. Among Catholic youth (13-39 years old) a local survey revealed that 89.5 percent consider religion as very important. The figure is not too far from a more recent representative survey, according to which 85 percent of Filipino adults say religion is important. But there is a caveat. The same survey found out that weekly church attendance among Catholics is 41 percent. This figure points to a significant decline from 64 percent in 1994. The drop has not necessarily caused any alarm on the part of religious leaders because the statistics still translates into millions of attendees who fill the pews of their respective parishes. These studies demand to be updated continuously, if the Church and other institutions with clear investments in the lives of the youth are to truly understand them.

Given the pace of social change brought about by technological advancement, globalization, and migration, for example, intergenerational differences will be much more defined in the years ahead. Indeed, with social change comes religious change. Religious beliefs and practices are contingent on prevailing social conditions. There are conditions inimical to certain religious practices but there are those that will encourage another variety even more.

And most of the time, religious change will be felt along generational lines. It is for this reason that apart from quantitative studies, observers must also pursue qualitative ones that interrogate the religious lives of young people. In contrast to the former, the latter can reveal fresh nuances about their religious views. And so a few years ago I conducted interviews with Catholic students around Metro Manila. I relied on what they shared to thrust out what being Catholic means to Filipino youth today. Indeed they share many nuances, which, when taken together point to "a religious identity that is more

59 K. Scott, "Problem or Paradox: Teaching the Catholic Religion in Catholic Schools," 58.


self-defined in orientation but also underpinned by a critical posture towards institutional Catholicism. In a manner of speaking, they are creative Catholics, who reinterpret religion in ways that make it more meaningful in their lives. This finding challenges theories of secularization according to which religion becomes less and less compelling, especially for young people. Here I share two areas that have come to the fore in my research.

For some, being Catholic means first and foremost having a personal and experiential relationship with God. In this schema, God is perceived to be an everyday companion who understands the person. One can communicate with Him anywhere, and at anytime. In response, He will communicate in various ways from the mundane such as a forwarded inspirational text message to the provocative in the form of a deep personal crisis. This relational aspect, to me, rectifies the stereotype that young Filipino Catholics are simply instrumental or transactional with their faith. That God is an everyday companion becomes evident even in their personal prayers.

Another facet that I have come across among my informants is that being Catholic is about exercising faith in practical ways such as participating in community outreach activities. This may explain why there are a lot of Filipino youth who volunteer to help during natural disasters and other moments of humanitarian need. One of my informants, who rarely attends Mass, feels that her decision to be involved in GK is justified because “in this way, something is at least happening, right? You get to help people unlike [when you’re] merely attending Mass. You’re just sitting there...” When probed deeper, the moral discourses of these young people can be traced back to the ideas of the Golden Rule. What it also shows is that for many of them, right living may be more important than right believing.

Amid these nuances, there appears to be a critical outlook towards the religious leadership for various reasons. One of my informants, who is a student catechist himself, has admitted to me that he disliked attending Mass at his local parish because the priest did not waver from “preaching about hell.” He felt the priest was very discouraging, even “condemning.” Others have commented on what they perceive to be the incessant interference of bishops in politics. During the time of my fieldwork, the biggest moral controversy for the Catholic leadership was the Reproductive Health bill, which later became a law that made artificial contraceptives, among other provisions, publicly funded and readily accessible to the poor. As I briefly mentioned above, it was associated with overall moral decline and the influence of Western values in Philippine society.

Collectively, these nuances concerning being Catholic suggest that the conventional and institutional aspects of religion such as doctrine, rite, and sacred traditions are not prominent.

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66 Id., “Filipino Catholic Students and Prayer as Conversation with God,” 133-152.


To highlight the generational difference, one can perhaps contrast these to the more evident forms of devotional piety among the elderly (usually female) such as praying the rosary on a daily basis, wearing the scapular, or even volunteering for the activities of the parish. Reinforcing their convictions is a critical outlook towards what young people consider to be the oxesees of some religious leaders.

But to be a creative Catholic is not necessarily a formal detachment from the Catholic religion. If anything, these facets reveal the reinterpretation of what it means to be Catholic for many young Filipinos today. It is about experiencing God and being able to express faith in practical ways. Expertise over doctrines, participation in the Sacraments, and belonging to one’s parish may be important but not necessarily fundamental. To drive home the point, these accounts are not intended to deny the positive experiences some of them have with their religious leaders. What made them feel they are really part of the Catholic Church is that they are known and have been mentored personally by their parish priests or lay leaders. This is indicative of what young people are looking for as far as their church leaders were concerned, namely companionship.

Some may have viewed the Plenary Assembly in Rome with cynicism because, apart from being considerably late in the game, it took place in the wake of abuse cases that have been rocking the religious establishment for many years. Cardinal Ravasi seems to be aware of this in admitting that “we have excluded [the youth] with our corruption and inconsistency.” Nevertheless, the 2018 Synod on the Youth is an opportunity to relate to the religious identity of Catholic students. These questions remain important: Who are the youth today? Where are they headed? What bothers them? And can we do something to ensure that none are left behind?

This section has argued that interrogating the religious identity of Catholic students is crucial in the context of religious education. If religious education were of the defensive type, these youthful nuances could be easily dismissed as shallow. Be that as it may, that is where – or better yet, who – they are. They are creative Catholics who are in their own ways thinking about their faith. A relevant religious education will draw from their reflections as potential resources.

**Revisiting “Beacons of Hope”**

Catholic schools, by virtue of their religious calling, have to confront an inherent contradiction. A tension exists between critical thinking fostered by teachers and the practice of religion expected of students. But instead of treating these two vocations as mutually exclusive, they can be approached as a paradox, which Catholic schools have a virtuous calling to navigate. Thus for Scott, to teach students to become religious and to teach them the content of the Catholic faith too (which they can engage with in an inquisitive but safe manner) are both possible. For this the infrastructure of the school has to be flexible. The classroom is an academic space but beyond that opportunities to practice the liturgy and participate in the life of the community should be organized.

The proposal is useful, but it needs to be made relevant and timely in the Philippines, where the situation is arguably more complicated. The tension is not just between the intellect and

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the religious life. This is because there are other social trends that have consequences on what happens in the classroom. I discussed three above although these are by no means exhaustive: instrumentalization, religious diversity, and the emergence of Creative Catholicism. Collectively, they complicate the picture for Catholic schools and the religious education they offer. Instrumentalization values the utility of education for social mobility. Religious diversity calls into question truth claims. Creative Catholicism means that students themselves are becoming critical of their own religion.

Catholic schools and their religious education component need to respond to these trends if they are still to be relevant. To be clear, these developments do not necessarily signal the decline of Catholic schools. They are still influential in the Philippines. At the same time, viewing these trends as a threat to the integrity and calling of religious education will render it defensive. Instead these trends challenge Catholic schools to reimagine their greater (and more timely) function in contemporary society. They point Catholic schools, as it were, in a different direction. The religious life and the intellectual understanding of the faith need to contribute to a far greater concern: social justice. It is in this regard that Catholic schools can reclaim their contribution to society as "beacons of hope".22 Here I echo D'Souza: They need to attend to what "faith and practice looked like, and how it would form Catholic students, future citizens, to take their place in the world and the public square, where they must transform themselves and the world."23

I thus agree with Gutierrez who emphasizes the role of Catholic schools to pursue social justice and the preferential option for the poor.24 This is not to deny the many other dimensions of religious education as spelled out in various Catholic documents such as the total formation of the person and adopting a moral worldview that challenges the dominant consumer culture.25 But the emphasis in favor of social justice is arguably called for. In light of the trends I spelled out above, I need to explain how exactly I am appropriating Gutierrez's argument. A few illustrations are called for.

For one, social justice in the form of the preferential option for the poor can be the guidepost of religious education and Catholic schools in general. Following it schools can credibly find interfaith agreement especially in the context of religious diversity in the Philippines. Having social justice as a guidepost means that it is not only the content of religious education. It must be a viable criterion by which the curriculum and other activities of the school are crafted, managed, and assessed. This approach will avoid the common mistake of sloganeering. Thus structural support by the school (or the diocese or religious order) for religious educators and their coordinators is

22 M. D'Souza, "The Progression of Religious Education since the Second Vatican Council as Seen through some Church Documents," 19.
23 Cf. A. Gutierrez, "Catholic Schools in the Philippines: Beacons of Hope in Asia," 743.
important. The danger, however, is that making social justice a systematic component of the educational bureaucracy can backfire in that it simply turns into a checklist of tasks. To arrest this possibility, the practice of mentorship must build a culture oriented towards social justice. This point is inescapable if religious education were to be treated as an imperative by life example, as Scott has repeatedly pointed out. 

Second, social justice can be emphasized and practiced in the very curriculum of religious education. An ideal attempt is to link it to the lessons and activities of other classes such as social studies. The realities of social and economic stratification are pretty commonplace in the Philippines. The most recent economic data show that farmers and fishermen have the highest poverty incidences (34.3 percent and 34 percent, respectively) in the country. These figures are higher than the national average of 21 percent. As the economy improves, so does job creation. But the figures are still considerable. The unemployment rate is 5.6 percent while underemployment is at 16.3 percent. These basic indicators must be linked to other situations that exacerbate conditions of poverty, such as vulnerabilities to climate change, disaster, and conflict. 

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77 Cf. K. SCOTT, “Problem or Paradox: Teaching the Catholic Religion in Catholic Schools,” 56.

At the same time, religious diversity is also a social reality that is inflected with stratification and discrimination in the Philippines. It is in this regard that social justice is as much religious as it is an economic concern. For example, as mentioned above, Muslims who migrate to urban centers have to deal with discrimination. So do some foreigners who are forced to isolate themselves in their own cultural enclaves. Thus the greater task is for students to grapple with the complexity of social stratification - its causes, manifestations, and various interventions that have been done to address it. It is in this regard that the social scientific enterprise becomes a useful resource for religious reflection.

Educators might fear that fostering social justice in the consciousness of students is going to be a thorny task. This might be the case given the instrumentalization of education and the perceived apathy of young people. My proposition though is that it is not entirely hopeless. In my discussion above, a salient worldview of creative Catholics is that right living is more important than right believing. It informs their attitude towards the interference of Catholic leaders in politics and also what they feel are the gaps in Catholic life in the Philippines today. In other words, they are alerted. This disposition in itself is a glimpse of hope as far as these young people are concerned. To what extent it is pervasive among all other youth in the Philippines demands a wider study but it is important in my view to recognize that they have a desire to make a positive difference. It is also for this reason that I do not necessarily subscribe to the perception that morality is in decline among young people.
Earlier, I pointed out how for some scholars and religious leaders, the problem of secularism is tied to moral relativism among the youth. Their attitudes toward certain moral issues might be shifting but this does not mean they do not have any moral compass. Elsewhere I have described their moral compass in terms of an orientation towards the Golden Rule. 83

To sum it up, fostering social justice and drawing from their religious diversity and spirituality can be a potential antidote to the instrumentalization of education. The hope is that they "will be ready to take their place in society" and "work for the improvement of social structures, making these structures more conform to the principles of the Gospel." 84 Through this critical engagement, educators can also confront a glaring reality. Catholic schools both at the basic and tertiary levels have produced leaders, many of whom seem to have failed when confronted with corruption.

The Final Point

This chapter has been generally concerned with the state of religious education in the Philippines. This is not necessarily a new topic as many educators themselves have tried to reflect on their pedagogy and the very content of religious education. 85 They are bothered that Catholic education does not seem to provide its students with adequate training to become morally reliable individuals at adulthood. The question is fundamentally a moral one because the Philippines is predominantly Catholic. It seems as if the Church and its educational arm have failed, as demonstrated by leaders embroiled in corruption.

My approach, however, has been different, for it has not paid attention to neither content nor pedagogy as far as the challenges of religious education in the Philippines is concerned. Instead, I have drawn from wider social trends that affect young people and ultimately the religious education they receive in school. This chapter has enumerated three trends but these are not necessarily exhaustive: instrumentalization, religious diversity, and the emergence of creative Catholics.

Instrumentalization is largely a result of how education has become a commodity for social advancement in the Philippines. It is part and parcel of the country’s development goals, tied very closely to the deployment of labor around the world. Religious diversity recognizes that Philippine society is no longer as homogenous as its demographic data might suggest. Religious groups are visible in terms of the churches they build, the conversions that take place, and even their political involvements. The impact on the classroom is not only with regard to its own religious diversity but the very consciousness of students growing up in a religiously diverse environment. Such religious diversity is also linked to issues of social stratification. Finally, the emergence of creative Catholics acknowledges that to be Catholic among young Filipinos is not a reality to be taken for granted anymore. It might appear that the youth are not as religious as their parents or grandparents. But it does not mean that they are not reflecting on their own religious upbringing. Religious diversity has implications on their religious identity; but, more importantly, they are also both-


85 Cf. S. LORENZO, "Three Reasons Why Catholic Education is Failing in the Philippines... and Elsewhere."
ored by what they see as the problems of Catholicism as a prominent religious institution in the Philippines.

These are trends that enrich current discussions of the challenges to religious education in the country. By foregrounding these trends, I have thus demonstrated social justice as the much needed orientation of religious education and Catholic schools at large. In my view, social justice is a potent antidote to instrumentalization. At the same time, I have framed it to recognize the place of religious diversity and draw from the critical reflections of creative Catholics.

There are Catholic schools that are already involved in teaching and practicing social justice. Gutierrez has documented, for example, how some Catholic schools encourage students to volunteer, recall their professional alumni to conduct outreach activities, and partner with public schools for faith and the formation of values. These are all commendable initiatives, which other Catholic schools can emulate, but they cannot be done just for the sake of doing them. Their impact on the part of the students and the communities they serve need to be carefully monitored. It is in religious education’s interest that social justice does not become merely a checklist of outreach activities. The problem, however, is that these initiatives can also be costly.

This brings me to a final point. One concern that I mentioned at the onset of this paper is access. Of course the glaring reality is that accessing Catholic education is in itself a feat in the Philippines. While there are many parochial schools around the country, Catholic schools, especially the elite, are prohibitive in terms of their fees. In other words, not everyone gets to have Catholic education to begin with. This reality has been the elephant in the room: it entails the necessity for another large study to look into ways of enhancing access to private Catholic education particularly among low-income students. Some interventions involve offering adult education, free evening classes for low-income students, and expanding scholarship opportunities. But all of these raise questions about financial viability and sustainability especially for parochial schools in poorer dioceses around the country.

Thus, Catholic schools, in order to be brighter beacons of hope, have to do better at reaching the most marginalized. At one level this is about enhancing access to quality Catholic education. As private institutions, they are affordable only to a few. In this sense they simply reinforce the already pervasive modes of economic stratification in Philippine society. Their outreach activities simply become value-added educational experiences that do not necessarily challenge marginalization. At another level, to become beacons of hope is also about renewing their commitment to social justice. As I have argued in this paper, this is not just an economic matter. It is also about issues of vulnerability and religious diversity in the country. And so Catholic schools cannot simply take pride at the social mobility of their graduates as their only achievement. Otherwise, they are only reinforcing the already pervasive disposition for parents and students who enroll in Catholic schools as an instrumental choice.

What the discussion thus far goes to show is that Catholic schools have a unique role to play in contemporary society. The tension between teaching the Catholic religion and teaching how to be religious is clearly present in every Catholic
school. But as a contribution to this volume, I hope to have shown that the bigger challenges of religious education can only be understood when young people's issues are foregrounded. I have proceeded under the assumption that education needs to journey with young people, even as they are confronted with many concerns. This is because ultimately they are the ones to confront their own challenges.

While the Church may have entrusted educators "with the integral human formation and the faith education of young people, "it is still the youth who will determine whether the world of tomorrow is more closely or more loosely bound to Christ."\textsuperscript{88} This statement is contemporaneously full of anxiety and hope; but what it also reveals is that in the final analysis, it is not so much the Catholic schools that are the "beacons of hope," it is the youth.

\textsuperscript{88} SACRED CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, "Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith."