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IN THIS ISSUE

Wilson Angelo Espiritu / Rethinking the Panata to the Nazareno of Quiapo

Nelson Mathew, O.Carm. / Theological Implications of the Symbols and Signs in the Sacrament of Matrimony of the Syro-Malabar Church

Hansol Goo / Worship Space and Immigrant Memory: Korean Parishes in Los Angeles and New Jersey

Dung Trang, LHC Khiet Tan / Our Lady of La Vang Journeys with the Nation: Marian Devotion and Pilgrimage in Vietnam



WILSON ANGELO ESPIRITU

Rethinking the *Panata*
to the Nazareno of Quiapo¹



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INTRODUCTION

Popular piety, which Pope Francis refers to as “the people’s mysticism,” reifies Filipino Catholicism.² One inimitable facet of Filipino popular piety is the practice called *panata*, a Tagalog word for solemn promise or commitment.³ Occasionally, *panata* is used interchangeably with *debosyon* (devotion); although, for some people, there are subtle distinctions in their meanings.⁴ In a religious context, the *panata* connotes “the undertaking of ritualistic, religious activities, particularly arduous and time-consuming ones that are offered by the devotee as sacrifices to God, in the belief that accomplishing such activities will allow the devotee to reap physical, spiritual, and emotional benefits.”⁵ Simply put, *panata* is the ritual practice of making a pledge to the sacred in return for a favor.

Karl Gaspar, an expert on Philippine Studies, claims that the *panata* practice can be traced to the indigenous belief system of Filipinos, which persisted despite their conversion to Catholicism.⁶ Gaspar emphasizes that a key element of Filipino re-

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- 1 This paper is based on the author’s doctoral dissertation: Wilson Angelo Espiritu, “*Locus Theologicus, Locus Politicus: A Mystical-Political Model of the Panata to the Nazareno of Quiapo*” (Dissertation, Leuven, KU Leuven, 2022).
 - 2 Francis, “*Evangelii Gaudium: Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World*,” November 24, 2013, para. 124, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html#The_economy_and_the_distribution_of_income.
 - 3 Virgilio Almario, ed., *UP Diksiyonaryong Filipino*, 2nd ed. (Pasig City: Anvil Publishing, 2010), 912.
 - 4 According to my interlocutors, *debosyon* is associated with feelings of affection and fidelity, while *panata* is associated with committed performances that include personal risks. However, the latter is sometimes connected negatively with *panatisimo* (fanaticism), although this is regarded to be a twisted form of devotion. See Milagros Aguinaldo, *A Study on Filipino Culture: The Devotion to the Black Nazarene of Quiapo* (Quezon City, Philippines: MMA Publications, 2002), 27. See also Paterno Esmaguél, “Devotion or Fanaticism? Why Devotees Sacrifice for Black Nazarene,” *Rappler*, January 9, 2019, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/220591-why-devotees-sacrifice-for-black-nazarene/>; Joe Torres, “Manila’s Grand Black Nazarene Procession Sets Off,” *ucanews.com*, January 9, 2019, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/manilas-grand-black-nazarene-procession-sets-off/84244>.
 - 5 Sophia Sto. Domingo et al., “*Sa Awa Ng Diyos: Understanding the Lived Experiences of Panata Among Filipina Black Nazarene Devotees in Low-Income Communities*,” *Philippine Journal of Psychology* 53 (2020): 55–79, <https://doi.org/10.31710/pjp/0053.03>.
 - 6 Karl Gaspar, “Fulfilling A Promise in Exchange for an Answered Prayer,” *FilCatholic: Spreading the Word to the World*, January 30, 2015, <https://www.filcatholic.org/fulfilling-a-promise-in-exchange-for-an-answered-prayer/>. For a more in-depth examination of the Filipino indigenous

ligious culture is the process of negotiating with the spiritual world in order to obtain a good life for oneself and one's family. The negotiation involves an exchange system where different practices function as an offering to the spirits. The key to the "negotiation process" is the fulfillment of the *panata*, a serious obligation that could even last a lifetime.⁷ This element of the Filipino indigenous belief system converged with Catholicism, a convergence that is apparent in the way most people construe the practice of *panata*.

While other cultures have similar ritualized pledging, Filipino anthropologist Fernando Zialcita points out the distinct character of Filipino *panata*, which is its "transferability *between kinsmen*."⁸ He observes that when the *panata* cannot be fulfilled because of several reasons (e.g., death or relocation abroad), a kinsfolk may fulfill it on behalf of the votary. Hence, the *panata* can be handed down to a family member across generations.

belief system and its impact on the people's practice of Catholicism, see Karl Gaspar, *The Masses Are Messiah: Contemplating the Filipino Soul* (Quezon City: Institute of Spirituality in Asia, 2010), chaps. 3–4. A detailed film documentary about the practice of *panata* as part of Filipino Catholics' cultural history can be seen on: Loren Legarda, "Kultura Ng Pamamanata," December 4, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jowbco38H0A>. I would like to clarify that the concept of *panata* is not limited to Filipino Catholics. For example, the term is used in the faith context of the *Iglesia ni Cristo*, a famous and politically influential religious organization founded in the Philippines. See "The Iglesia Ni Cristo: Panata o Taimtim Na Pangako Natin Sa Diyos Ang Magpasalamat," *The Iglesia Ni Cristo* (blog), December 16, 2016, <http://theiglesianicristo.blogspot.com/2016/12/panata-o-taimtim-na-pangako-natin-sa.html>.

- 7 Gaspar, "Fulfilling A Promise in Exchange for an Answered Prayer"; Gaspar, *The Masses Are Messiah: Contemplating the Filipino Soul*, 90–91. Michael Ramos, "Popular Religiosity: A Filipino Experience of an Inculturated Faith," *Canadian International Journal of Social Science and Education* 4 (October 2015): 247, 250. Ramos states: "[o]nce *panata* is not performed as promised it could result to a painful difficulty to the devotee. On the other hand, if it is performed, internal order, sense of security and protection are guaranteed. Hence, Filipino devotees believed in '*panata*' and the corresponding rituals should be done in order that the request will be granted." See also Mark Iñigo Tallara, "Chasing Miracles in Quiapo and Antipolo: Symbolism and Expression of Popular Piety in the Philippines" (PhD Dissertation, Singapore, National University of Singapore, 2018), 12–13; Mark Iñigo Tallara, "Symbolism and Expression of Performing Panata in the Philippines: An Ethnohistorical Analysis of Nuestro Padre Jesus Nazareno of Quiapo," *Religions* 13, no. 4 (April 2022): 9, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13040272>.
- 8 Fernando Zialcita, "Popular Interpretations of the Passion of Christ," *Philippine Sociological Review* 34, no. 1/4 (1986): 59; Tallara, "Symbolism and Expression of Performing Panata in the Philippines," 12.

The preceding discussion shows that *panata* is traditionally understood in terms of relationship with the sacred, which I refer to as the mystical dimension of faith.⁹ Granting that as a popular devotion, the *panata* practice must be principally concerned with faith's mystical dimension, I maintain that this reading is deficient. A one-sided view of the mystical dimension of spiritual practices, like *panata*, neglects the similarly important political dimension of faith.

Overemphasis on spiritual performances at the expense of political responsibility is one of the prevalent problems in Filipino Catholicism. Filipino theologian Emmanuel Serafica de Guzman calls this tendency "a-political holiness." He observes:

"Christian holiness has been confined to the private sphere that is practiced by the individual. What has developed is a privatizing faith which focuses almost solely in the personal experience, and where spirituality is associated with the interior life, the life of virtues, and the pursuit of perfection through their exercise . . . Religious celebrations make people feel good and protected from the chaotic mundane world. Devotional pieties jump from the child Jesus to the crucifixion and resurrection, leaving a big lacuna on the ministry of Jesus. People like to hear what affirms their experiences but reject those that are disquieting or challenging . . . Prayer assemblies talk of a God who cares and is compassionate but divorced from social conflicts, and spiritual events focus too much on personal sins and personal salvation."¹⁰

A few decades earlier, the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II) had already expressed apprehension about Filipino Catholics' over-prioritizing of popular piety at the expense of other vital aspects of their faith, for instance, aligning the world in the image of God's reign.¹¹ I broadly refer to this aspect as faith's

9 Edward Schillebeeckx, *On Christian Faith: The Spiritual, Ethical and Political Dimensions*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 71-72. For an exposition of the mystical dimension of the Nazareno devotion, see Teresita Obusan, *Mystic or Mistake: Exploring Filipino Mysticism in Quiapo* (Quezon City, Philippines: Institute of Spirituality in Asia, 2008).

10 Emmanuel Serafica de Guzman, "Walking with Feet on the Muddy Earth," *Hapag: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Theological Research* 7, no. 1 (2010): 94.

11 Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines* (Manila: Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, 1992), paras. 13, 80. Hereafter referred to as PCP II.

political dimension. However, notwithstanding the concerns raised about popular piety, PCP II recognized its potential to contribute to infusing the gospel message into the lives of the Filipino people.¹² This potential alludes to the latent political power of popular piety.¹³

To unleash the latent political power of *panata*, this paper will offer a reading that integrates *panata*'s mystical and political dimensions. This reading aims for an enhanced enactment of *panata*, which involves commitment to the common good.¹⁴ My focus in this hermeneutical exploration will be one of the most prevalent practices of *panata* in Filipino Catholicism, the one accorded to Nuestro Padre Jesus Nazareno (hereafter, the Nazareno) of Quiapo, Manila. In the succeeding sections, I will trace the history of the Nazareno devotion;¹⁵ examine the convergence of its mystical and political ramifications according to the narratives of Nazareno devotees who took part in my qualitative research;¹⁶ and, building on these narratives, develop a newfound theological interpretation of the *panata*.

TRACING THE NAZARENO DEVOTION'S HISTORY

The Nazareno of Quiapo is a life-size, dark statue of a suffering Christ. Its reputation as a miraculous image has made it popular with countless devotees. Over centuries, devotees express their devotion and loyalty to the Nazareno through their *panata*, which they fervently fulfill. What is the origin of this devotion?

Trading ships known as "galleons" traveled between the Philippines and Mexico from 1565 until 1815. Through these galleon trades, people were able to build

12 PCP II, 237, sec. 1 art. 20.

13 For an extensive discussion of this potential of popular piety, see Ambrose Mong, *Power of Popular Piety: A Critical Examination* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2019).

14 The concept of "common good" is understood here as "the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily." *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1993, para. 1906, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P6K.HTM.

15 For a more comprehensive exposition of the history of the Nazareno devotion, see Tallara, "Symbolism and Expression of Performing Panata in the Philippines," 3-9.

16 This qualitative study was approved by KU Leuven's institutional review board. I have rendered the words of the Nazareno devotees from Filipino to English.

relationships and exchange beliefs and religious practices across the Pacific. These exchanges were key to the “transmission and transplanting” of the Catholic faith to Filipinos.¹⁷ It was also through these exchanges that the Nazareno reached the shore of the Philippines.

According to several scholars, the Nazareno originated in Mexico and was carried to the Philippines in the 1600s by Augustinian Recollects aboard the galleon ship *Espiritu Santo*.¹⁸ The Augustinian Recollect missionaries, responsible for the Church of San Juan Bautista in Bagumbayan (now Rizal Park in Manila), requested their Mexican confreres to commission the sculpting of the Nazareno to be enthroned in their church.¹⁹

There is, however, a widely known account of the Nazareno’s two original statues.²⁰ The first one was known as “the Nazarene of the Spanish Elites” because the *Cofradia de Jesus Nazareno* (Confraternity of Jesus the Nazarene), who were Spanish citizens of Manila, only allowed its members to venerate it. Filipino dev-

17 Tallara, “Symbolism and Expression of Performing Panata in the Philippines,” 5; Mark Iñigo Tallara, “Quiapo and Antipolo as Shared Spaces for Performing Panata: An Ethnohistorical Analysis of Nuestro Padre Jesus Nazareno and Nuestra Señora de La Paz y Buen Viaje,” in *Pamana at Sining: Valuing the Arts, Rediscovering Heritage, and Reaffirming Identities* (Presented at the DLSU Arts Congress 2020, Manila: DLSU, 2020), 190-191.

18 For specifics, Tallara refers to the early history of the Recoletos in the Philippines in Joseph De la Concepcion’s *Relacion provincia de San Nicolas de Tolentino de las Islas Philipinas, del origen, progressos y estado de dicha provincia, y de los Religiosos que han trabaxado en ella, desde el año de 1605 hasta el presente de 1651* (1751). See Tallara, “Chasing Miracles in Quiapo and Antipolo,” 105-6. For the list of Tallara’s historical sources, see Tallara, “Quiapo and Antipolo as Shared Spaces for Performing Panata,” 202; “Symbolism and Expression of Performing Panata in the Philippines,” 5-6, 13-14. For other corroborating sources, see: Vicente Catapang, *Brief History of the Church of Quiapo and Its Miraculous Image Jesus Nazarene* (Manila: Fajardo Press & Litho Company, 1937), 5-6; Aguinaldo, *A Study on Filipino Culture*, 22; Fernando N. Zialcita, “The Burnt Christ: The Filipinization of a Mexican icon,” *Cuaderno Internacional de Estudios Humanísticos y Literatura (CIEHL)*, no. 19 (2013): 67; Tony Twigg, “The Black Nazarene, A Philippine National Ethos,” *The Journal of the Asian Arts Society of Australia* 24, no. 2 (June 2015): 17; Rochie Avelino Matienzo, “The Religious Experience of the Black Nazarene Popular Devotion in the Light of the Kierkegaardian Notion of Faith” (PhD Dissertation, Manila, University of Santo Tomas, 2015), 72.

19 Matienzo, “The Religious Experience of the Black Nazarene Popular Devotion,” 72.

20 Another report mentions a replica image of the Nazareno being revered in Cavite, a region south of Manila. Tallara tells the narrative of an English-born baron, Melville, who traveled from Great Britain to San Roque Church in Cavite, Philippines, in 1724 to fulfill his *panata* to the Nazareno, which is enshrined there. It was claimed that Melville had recovered from an unusual illness. See Tallara, “Chasing Miracles in Quiapo and Antipolo,” 107-8.

otees were prohibited from touching or kissing the statue. To prevent conflict between Spanish and Filipino devotees, a second statue was commissioned in the 18th century. This second statue was referred to as the “Nazareno for the Indios,” a derogatory term of the Spaniards for native Filipinos. The second statue eventually became the well-venerated Nazareno of Quiapo, while the first was ruined during World War II.²¹

It is believed that the anonymous native Mexican artist was the inspiration for the Nazareno’s deep brown skin tone, an uncommon heavenly profile for Filipinos.²² A common tale, on the other hand, tells of how the Nazareno’s color originated from its miraculous survival from fires. But a more plausible explanation is its mesquite wood material endemic in northern Mexico.²³ Regardless of the true reason for its color, the Nazareno’s dark skin tone has made it more relatable to the Filipino masses, who like him, are non-white.²⁴

The statue of the Nazareno arrived in Manila in 1606 and was transported to the Augustinian Recollects Church in Bagumbayan. In 1608, it was transferred to San Nicholas de Tolentino Church in Intramuros, the walled city of Manila.²⁵ Later on, several Filipino devotees requested the Archbishop of Manila to relocate the Nazareno to another church outside Intramuros.²⁶ In response to the petitions, Archbishop Basilio Tomás Sancho y Hernando directed the Nazareno’s relocation

21 Tallara, “Quiapo and Antipolo as Shared Spaces for Performing Panata,” 205.

22 Pio Andrade, Jr., “Quiapo in the History of the Nation,” in *Quiapo: Heart of Manila* (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University and Metropolitan Museum of Manila, 2006), 44; Aguinaldo, *A Study on Filipino Culture*, 22; Amparo Pamela Fabe, “The Black Nazarene,” *Life Today*, 2006, 14.

23 Matienzo, “The Religious Experience of the Black Nazarene Popular Devotion,” 73; Tallara, “Chasing Miracles in Quiapo and Antipolo,” 115; Twigg, “The Black Nazarene, A Philippine National Ethos,” 17.

24 See Zialcita, “The Burnt Christ,” 68–74.

25 Matienzo dates the arrival of the image in 1607. Matienzo, “The Religious Experience of the Black Nazarene Popular Devotion,” 72. However, there are sources that show that the arrival of the ship in Manila was on the 31st of May 1606. See Juan de la Concepción, *Historia general de Philipinas* (Manila: A. de la Rosa y Balagtas, 1788); Emmanuel Luis Romanillos, *The Augustinian Recollects in the Philippines: Hagiography and History* (Manila: Recoletos Communications, 2001); cited in Tallara, “Chasing Miracles in Quiapo and Antipolo,” 106.

26 Tallara, “Quiapo and Antipolo as Shared Spaces for Performing Panata,” 205.



to San Juan Bautista Parish in Quiapo, Manila in 1767.²⁷ Today, this transfer is celebrated every 9th of January as the Traslacion feast, where millions of devotees flood the streets of Manila to join the grand procession of the Nazareno.

Since its arrival, the Nazareno has attracted numerous visitors who come to venerate the image of a suffering Christ. Miracles have been attributed to this image, notably healings from illness. Hence, the Nazareno continues to attract an increasing number of adherents.²⁸ Reports of injuries and deaths or even terrorist bomb threats do not deter devotees from taking part in the feast of the Nazareno's Traslacion, where they mostly fulfill their *panata*.²⁹

While the Traslacion is a highly attended event for devotees, they also practice their *panata* at Quiapo Church, especially on Fridays, which they call the day of the Nazareno devotion. Inside and around the vicinity of the Church, one will witness the diverse acts of piety in which devotees perform their *panata*. The only thing that impeded the regular *panata* performances in Quiapo Church and during the Traslacion feast was the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite that, devotees

27 Andrade, Jr., "Quiapo in the History of the Nation," 44; Aguinaldo, *A Study on Filipino Culture: The Devotion to the Black Nazarene of Quiapo*, 22-23; Gregorio Brillantes, "Black Christ Among the Neon Lights," in *Filipino Heritage: The Making of a Nation*, ed. Alfredo Roces, vol. 10 (Manila: Lahing Pilipino Publishing Company, 1978), 2754. There are also claims that the Nazareno arrived in Quiapo in 1787. See Twigg, "The Black Nazarene, A Philippine National Ethos," 17; Tallara, "Quiapo and Antipolo as Shared Spaces for Performing Panata," 205; Matienzo, "The Religious Experience of the Black Nazarene Popular Devotion," 74.

28 See Arnulfo Fortunado, "Feast of the Black Nazarene Draws Millions to Manila's Streets," *Catholics & Cultures*, May 7, 2015, <https://www.catholicsandcultures.org/philippines/feast-black-nazarene>; Jhoanna Ballaran, "Black Nazarene Devotees Keep Coming Back for Life's 'Miracles,'" *Inquirer.Net*, January 9, 2018, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/958735/black-nazarene-devotees-keep-coming-back-for-lifes-miracles-traslacion-feast-of-black-nazarene-quiapo-devotees-metro-manila>.

29 Bernie Lopez, "The Mammoth Black Nazarene Procession," *Daily Tribune*, August 7, 2021, <https://tribune.net.ph/index.php/2021/08/07/the-mammoth-black-nazarene-procession/>; Kate Evangelista, "Black Nazarene Devotees Defy Terror Alert," *Inquirer News*, January 9, 2012, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/124947/black-nazarene-devotees-defy-terror-alert>.

creatively found a way around this impediment by performing their devotion in virtual space.³⁰

Today, the Nazareno devotion has spread beyond Quiapo, reaching other places in the Philippines and even abroad, thanks to his devotees who are overseas Philippine workers.³¹

LISTENING TO NAZARENO DEVOTEES

To gain insight into devotees' beliefs and practices related to their *panata* to the Nazareno, one should carefully listen to and analyze their stories. To achieve this goal, I interviewed a number of devotees employing a critical realist approach. I particularly used this approach acknowledging that "a critical realist perspective would listen to the testimony of people who have mystical or religious experiences, those who discern a dimension of life beyond the see-touch realm."³² In other words, a critical realist approach allows for narratives of spiritual experiences that are beyond simple empirical observation. These narratives can access not just my interlocutors' behaviors and sensibilities, but more importantly, the intricately

30 See Elijah Gabriel Flores, "Quaranscenes of Filipino Religiosity: An Analysis of Performing Online Devotion to the Black Nazarene during the COVID-19 Pandemic," in *Pandemic, Resilience, and the Arts*, vol. 5, 5 (The 14th DLSU Arts Congress, Manila: De La Salle University, 2021), 1-10, <https://www.dlsu.edu.ph/wp-content/uploads/pdf/conferences/arts-congress-proceedings/2021/frdp-02.pdf>; Jose Alain Austria, "Traslacion @ Roblox: The Pandemic and the Emergence of a Black Nazarene Virtual Sacred Space," in *The 14th DLSU Arts Congress Proceedings: Pandemic, Resilience, and the Arts*, vol. 5, 5 (The 14th DLSU Arts Congress, Manila: De La Salle University, 2021), 1-12, <https://www.dlsu.edu.ph/wp-content/uploads/pdf/conferences/arts-congress-proceedings/2021/frdp-01.pdf>.

31 See, for instance, Hermosa, "Black Nazarene Devotees in Middle East to Offer Prayers for an End to COVID-19 Pandemic – Manila Bulletin," *Manila Bulletin*, January 9, 2022, <https://mb.com.ph/2022/01/09/black-nazarene-devotees-in-the-middle-east-to-offer-prayers-for-an-end-to-covid-19-pandemic/>.

32 Robert Martin, "Having Faith in Our Faith in God: Towards a Critical Realist Epistemology for Christian Education," *Religious Education* 96, no. 2 (March 2001): 256, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344080120045>.



nuanced reports of events, experiences, and underlying circumstances or processes that represent various aspects of a multifaceted and multi-layered reality.³³ Furthermore, a critical realist interview facilitates a collaborative construction of meanings of experiences and practices between the researcher and the interlocutors.³⁴ Let me now turn to a description of my interlocutors.

Milagros Aguinaldo, a scholar of Nazareno devotion, estimates that the majority of Nazareno devotees are middle-aged because during this period people realize the volatility of life and the importance of faith. Most devotees are men, married, and from lower-income families. Fifteen percent come from the upper class; they credit the Nazareno for their financial stability.³⁵ This only shows that although Nazareno devotees may be typified as *masa* (pebs), the truth is they do not belong to a single social class. Celia Bonilla, another scholar of the devotion, concurs:

“They [Nazareno devotees] come from a wide range of economic and cultural backgrounds—from lowly street sweepers to top-caliber surgeons; from school teachers and office workers to hardened ex-convicts (even escaped convicts); from dyed-in-the-wool Manileños to the many *provinciano* who hail from the remotest barrios. There are even *balikbayan* (Filipino visitors residing in foreign lands), as well as foreign visitors.”³⁶

This description shows that the Nazareno devotees’ demographic composition is varied. Devotees come from different walks of life and from different corners of the Philippines and the world. What binds these people together is their ardent devotion to the Nazareno driven by their reliance on his saving grace.³⁷

33 Chris Smith and Tony Elger, “Critical Realism and Interviewing Subjects,” in *Studying Organizations Using Critical Realism: A Practical Guide*, ed. Paul Edwards, Joe O’Mahoney, and Steve Vincent (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 119.

34 Smith and Elger, 110.

35 Aguinaldo, *A Study on Filipino Culture*, 25.

36 Celia Bonilla, “Devotion to the Black Nazarene as an Aesthetic Experience,” in *Quiapo: Heart of Manila* (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University and Metropolitan Museum of Manila, 2006), 108.

37 Matienzo, “The Religious Experience of the Black Nazarene Popular Devotion,” 290–91.

My interlocutors' profiles matched the aforementioned descriptions of Nazareno devotees. Most of them were above thirty years old (only 5 out of 30 were below that age range) and 20 out of 30 were male. They came from a range of locations outside Manila, as distant as Mindanao (the second largest and southernmost island of the Philippines) and from abroad (through an overseas Philippine worker). They had different educational, socio-political, and economic backgrounds, and were part of several religious organizations. Some were members of the renowned group of male devotees called Hijos del Nazareno, while the others considered themselves *mamamasan* (bearers of the Nazareno statue) or regular devotees.

Through my interviews, I discovered that devotees understood their *panata* as a personal pledge to thank the Nazareno for the grace he provides, including granted prayers and everyday provisions. *Panata* practices center on thanksgiving and gratitude to the Nazareno. Devotees recognized that they could never fully repay the Nazareno, so their *panata* becomes their modest way of reciprocating the Nazareno's innumerable graces. They refer to this act of gratitude as *pagsusukli* (returning the favor/surplus). They perform their *panata* through acts of devotion in honor of the Nazareno, e.g., being an active member of Hijos del Nazareno, taking part in the Traslacion feast and carrying the *andas* (the carriage of the statue), attending novena Masses in Quiapo or serving the church, among others.

One of my interlocutors interestingly noted the *panata* performance as *pagsusukli* means sharing the Nazareno's blessings with others. This implies enacting one's *panata* beyond pious performances for the Nazareno towards actions that benefit other people. The concept of *panata* then transitions from a private pledge to an expression of social responsibility.³⁸ How does this shift happen?

Devotees usually sought personal benefits, such as healing and good health, education, livelihood and other necessities, or a general ease of living. As their act of *pagsusukli*, they incorporate into their *panata* their social actions, for instance,

38 Sto. Domingo et al., "Sa Awa Ng Diyos," 70-71.

joining the Green Brigade (volunteer street sweepers), taking part in risk reduction planning during Quiapo's major events, and donating to the needy, especially those affected by natural disasters.

In 2020, I conducted a participant observation of the last non-virtual Traslacion preceding the COVID-19 pandemic. At the event, I saw volunteers providing food and water, known as *pacaridad*, to other participants, and the collaboration between devotees, organizers, government agencies, and other parts of the community to ensure the event was secure and successful. During the pandemic, despite being affected by the lockdown themselves, groups of devotees still assisted those who were more severely impacted.

Through social actions, the enactment of *panata* becomes more than just a pious ritual. The people's devotion transforms into works that show compassion and solidarity with those who are suffering, helping them rise from their affliction—much like the Nazareno who rises despite the weight of his cross. Theologian Antonio Sison astutely notes:

“The *panata* is brought to bear not just in ‘vertical’ devout practices but also in ‘horizontal’ heroic acts of self-sacrifice that characterize the connectedness of devotees with one another . . . These devotional practices involving the fulfillment of annual vows of sacrifice in the name of Jesus for the sake of others—a lived, communitarian expression of the self-offering represented by the venerated Black Nazarene icon itself—evinces a Filipino understanding of religion where love of God and love of neighbor are mutually inclusive.”³⁹

Incorporating horizontal actions for the common good in performing the *panata* to the Nazareno illustrates a departure from a narrow mystical reading of devotion. It shows that a politically implicated performance of faith, one which is incontrovertibly rooted in the mystical, is not just a potential but an actuality.

39 Antonio Sison, *The Art of Indigenous Inculturation: Grace on the Edge of Genius* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2021), 156.

Besides the examples already mentioned, their *panata* has also led some devotees to be engaged in concerns that are explicitly political. For instance, a devotee who was a barangay captain (a village head) felt that he had to incorporate his *panata* into his official duties, even though it could present some problems. He recounted refusing to present police officers a roster of people who may have been killed as part of the government's war on drugs. His *panata* obliged him to align his political and ethical decisions with his faith. For him, having blood on one's hands goes against the devotion to the Nazareno.

Another devotee shared how his *panata* to the Nazareno influenced his vocation in politics. He gives the Nazareno the credit for his success in government, especially the programs he rolled out for his constituents. He believed the Nazareno had called him to serve the people of his town, and that led him to his government position. Accordingly, he claimed he practiced the "politics of the Lord Nazareno" and not "worldly politics," noting how he tried to govern according to Jesus' values.

Private citizen devotees have likewise underscored the political implications of their *panata*. There were political initiatives among their ranks. For instance, a devotee initiated the production of a Quiapo coffee-table book, which will be distributed to politicians to remind them to be an honest leader. Then, there was a devotee who acknowledged how her *panata* inspired her to take on societal causes. She stated:

"If you truly practice the *panata* and follow the Lord Jesus Nazareno, you must obey what he teaches. And we know that the teaching of the Lord Jesus Nazareno is that you care about what is going on around you, you care about what is happening in your society. So, in my own little way, I can show the act of the *panata*, my obedience to the Lord Jesus Nazareno, by talking about what is going on in society. If what is happening is not right, I speak up through social media, through the formation of young people, and to the people I talk to."

The testimonials I featured are interesting cases where the *panata* to the Nazareno has shown to encourage socio-political engagement. Nevertheless, I acknowledge that these examples may be outliers. There are numerous devotees who ostensibly



lean towards the attitude of “a-political holiness”; they shun the association of their *panata* to politics, the former they deem “sacred” while the latter they deem “dirty.” Consequently, they think the mystical and the political should be kept apart. This attitude manifests in the ambivalence and lack of a unified stance of devotees on pressing socio-political issues. One interviewee remarked that to preserve the unity of their group, devotees “will not jeopardize their devotion with politics [originally in English].”

So, the problem remains—the *panata* to the Nazareno is narrowly viewed as a popular piety, neglecting its political dimension. There is then a need to cultivate what I have discovered as inherent socio-political ramifications of this devotion vis-à-vis its common mystical interpretations and performances. Devotees would hopefully realize the relevance of their devotion to their society and, with that realization, be motivated to integrate in their *panata* performances their participation in institutional and structural reforms for the common good.⁴⁰ The last section shows how theology can contribute to this undertaking.

THE PANATA AS MYSTICAL-POLITICAL

In contrast to the negative outlook of most devotees towards politics, the examples I presented earlier reveal the political relevance of the *panata* to the Nazareno. These examples highlight the potency of *panata* to link the mystical and the political. Those who have a mystical bond with the Nazareno have become sharers of a political bond with those people who, like him, are suffering. The meaning of the *panata* then expands from a simple expression of popular piety to a performance of socio-political solidarity.

I suggest that providing an alternative theological reading of the *panata* can be one way of fostering the link between Nazareno devotion and socio-political respon-

40 Wilfredis Jacob, “Toward a Theology of the Devotion to the Black Nazarene in Quiapo” (MA Thesis, Quezon City, Philippines, Ateneo de Manila University, 1975), 119.

sibility. To develop this renewed understanding and appreciation of the *panata*, I espouse the soteriological framework of a notable Catholic theologian of the last century, Edward Schillebeeckx.

According to Schillebeeckx, “Without prayer or mysticism politics soon becomes cruel and barbaric; without political love, prayer or mysticism soon becomes sentimental or uncommitted interiority.”⁴¹ For Schillebeeckx, then, the mystical and the political are mutually and dialectically related aspects of the practice of the Christian faith. This framework implies that performances directed at the mystical are not exclusive to those directed at the political; rather, these two can mutually enrich one another as interrelated expressions of faith. This interrelation encourages a reciprocal relationship where mystical devotion ensouls political engagement, and political engagement embodies mystical devotion.

Through this theological framework, the *panata* can be understood as a practice that fosters a mystical relationship with the Nazareno, which then becomes visible through devotees’ socio-political engagement. Accordingly, fervent devotion to the Nazareno finds an expression in joining his mission to bring relief and salvation to suffering people. These expressions would involve not only charitable activities and social actions but also manifest political engagement that engenders structural reforms for social justice.⁴²

Seeing the *panata* to the Nazareno through this lens allows its metamorphosis. From a type of devotion that was mainly focused on pious performances, the *panata* evolves into a lived expression of Christian discipleship that incorporates both its mystical and political implications, enabling it to actualize its potential to be of service to God and the world.⁴³ A Nazareno devotee then pledges to be his ally in

41 Schillebeeckx, *On Christian Faith: The Spiritual, Ethical and Political Dimensions*, 75.

42 Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God*, trans. John Bowden, CW Vol. 10 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 168 [169]; Francis, “Fratelli Tutti: Encyclical Letter on Fraternity and Social Friendship” October 3, 2020, para. 182, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_encyclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

43 Michael Demetrius Asis, *The Filipino Christ and the Historical Jesus: Toward a Filipino Christology* (Quezon City: Blue Books Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2021), 99.

bringing forth salvation, liberation, and transformation in people's lives and their society.⁴⁴

Ultimately, “[d]espite various meanings attached to the idea of [*panata*], one thing is clear: it is a personal act performed before a community. [*Panata*] is an experience of sacrifice, done individually yet performed for the good of others as well.”⁴⁵ The theological meaning I offer in this paper underscores how *panata* can be a “mystical-political praxis” that participates in God’s saving work, specifically by actualizing salvation for those who are suffering.⁴⁶ While maintaining *panata*’s character as a popular piety, this interpretation rethinks the theological significance of *panata*, underlining its socio-political implication. Such an interpretation upholds both the *panata*’s contemplative and transformative qualities, allowing it to become a “critical and productive force” of one’s faith.⁴⁷ With this fresh outlook, I hope to evoke a new brand of lived Filipino Catholicism, one that is not solely concerned with the mystical but also with the political.

44 Edward Schillebeeckx, *Interim Report on the Books “Jesus” and “Christ,”* CW Vol.8 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 107 [122].

45 Sir Anril Pineda Tiatco, “Panata, Pagtitipon, Pagdiriwang: A Preliminary Contextualization of Cultural Performances in the Philippines,” *Humanities Diliman* 16, no. 1 (2019): 74.

46 Kevin Considine, “From Han to Mystical-Political Praxis: Intercultural Hermeneutics and Schillebeeckx’s Soteriology,” in *Grace, Governance and Globalization*, ed. Stephan van Erp, Martin Poulson, and Lieven Boeve (London: T&T Clark International, 2017), 84.

47 Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Christian Experience in the Modern World*, trans. John Bowden, CW Vol. 7 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 813 [817]. Stephan van Erp and Daniel Minch, eds., *The T&T Clark Handbook of Edward Schillebeeckx* (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 307–8.

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