

## **PUBLIC LIVES**

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### **The Filipino's religious devotions**

It is one of those enchanting events that vividly encapsulate the Filipino's idea of what it means to live in this world. I refer to the annual procession of the Black Nazarene of Quiapo. But we may point to other equally popular religious devotions, like the fluvial procession of Our Lady of Penafrancia, that have produced echoes in many nations, wherever Filipino migrants have found a home.

The view of the world and the philosophy of life that these devotions re-enact may perhaps be summed up as follows: Life is hardship; we can only live by God's grace. The more we suffer, the more we are blessed. The Creator decides our fate; we can only wish for it to be bearable. With him, everything is possible; we only need to make our wishes known. If they are granted, we must remember to show our gratitude by prayer and by mortification, at least once a year, but for the rest of our life. If God seems not to respond, we must not despair. He is listening, but he has reasons we cannot always fathom. At the right time he may speak to us through the voice in our hearts. God's ways are mysterious; it is not for us to question him. We can only aspire to purify ourselves by learning how to suffer with him.

As Marx more or less put it, this is the sigh of the oppressed and the vulnerable in a highly unequal society. What it amounts to basically is a relentless rehearsal of dying and the cultivation of acceptance in a heartless world. What it demands is deep faith, more than good deeds; supplication and humility, more than personal striving. These devotions rest on a "metaphysics of presence" -- the God we can touch, who is here and now, rather than the omnipresent Being we cannot see. Belief in the healing power of objects that can be held and kissed -- religious images,

garments, rosaries, scapulars -- rather than in the liberating power of the Word.

The Spanish friars who brought Christianity to our shores in the 16th century, and grafted it onto the animistic faith they found in these islands, introduced a God that naturalized suffering, and rewarded passivity and submission. The same faith, however, gave our ancestors, throughout the long period of colonial rule, a chance to discover for themselves the redemptive power of solidarity, compassion, and love. Today, it is difficult to imagine the unity of the Filipino family and that of our nation without this faith.

But though it fills our churches and sustains Christianity's vibrant presence in our society, this folk religiosity is a cause for worry among the clergy. This may be gleaned from what Bishop Deogracias Iniguez Jr. said on radio the other day: "The devotion we give to this statue (the Black Nazarene) should be properly understood. This does not have special powers, it's just a representation of our Lord. When you believe it has special powers per se, that is when it becomes superstition." To those who persist in getting as close to the statue as they can, only to get hurt in the process, the Archbishop of Manila, Cardinal Gaudencio Rosales, offers a timely reminder: "Distance is nothing to God.... It is the people who distance themselves, but if you call on God, he will listen to you no matter how far away you are." Msgr. Jose Clemente Ignacio, the rector of the Minor Basilica of the Black Nazarene goes into the heart of the matter: "There are elements of fanaticism that we have to correct and to control."

Such admonitions have invariably fallen on deaf ears. The number of people who get crushed and maimed during the Nazarene's procession rises every year. There has been a surge in the number of women and children who recklessly plunge into the frenzied and swirling crowds. A deadly stampede can happen anytime. The Catholic hierarchy is deeply aware of this, and wishes to avert such a tragedy.

But, more than the big accidents that are waiting to happen, it is the quality of the religious experience that distresses the Church. Many believe it is time that Filipino Catholicism moved away from the motifs of fatalism and helplessness, dependence on miracles, and the transactional religiosity that have characterized the practice of faith among our people.

This kind of religion, a vestige of feudal culture, will have diminishing relevance in a society that is becoming more complex, where the fulfillment of immediate needs is more possible than ever. Today, against the tide of materialism, the modern Church seeks a total spiritualization of everyday life. It speaks against the shallow compartmentalization of faith into which the naïve understanding of one's religion so often leads. It calls on the faithful to search for the Gospel behind the rituals, the processions, and the icons.

If the Church succeeds in the rationalization of religious belief and practice, it will radically transform the Filipino psyche. It will likely undermine the authoritarian foundations of our culture – the dependence on the benevolence of powerful individuals rather than on the importance of personal effort, collective struggle, and social solidarity.

But, on the other hand, one can only wonder what a rational theology might do to a religious culture that has sustained our people's religious devotions through 450 years of Filipino Christianity. It is precisely this religiosity, simple and deep, that has served as our people's defense and necessity in an uncertain world. It is this same naïve faith that has permitted them to conquer their fears, and to say, whenever they feel most vulnerable, "Bahala na!"

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