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Coping cultures

“There has been an extraordinary demand for more masses,” my brother Bishop Ambo told me. “Some people go to church twice on Sundays. The churches are packed, and we don’t have enough priests to minister to everyone’s spiritual needs.” I saw what he meant when I visited him the other day, a full week after the March 11 earthquake and tsunami that hit northern Japan. Every seat was taken and many people were standing on the aisles as he said Mass. The collective praying and singing filled the cavernous Holy Rosary Church with resonant voices that rose to the heavens like smoke from burning incense.

It is a great moment for religion, and a bad time for science. As the world anxiously watched helicopters douse the damaged nuclear reactors of Fukushima with sea water in a desperate bid to halt the overheating of spent nuclear fuel rods, people asked if science had not reached its limits and if the Japanese had not miscalculated the risks. Against the backdrop of Japan’s vaunted technological achievement, this crude method of putting out a fire looked bizarre and futile.

Not too far away from the crippled nuclear reactors is the city of Akita, located in the Tohoku Prefecture, the place hardest-hit by the 9.0 magnitude earthquake and the gigantic killer tsunami that quickly followed it. Many Catholics are familiar with the reported apparitions of the Virgin Mary to Agnes Sasagawa, an ailing Japanese woman who had gone to live among the nuns of Akita. The messages from these 1973 apparitions consistently warned of approaching calamities.

Pilgrimages to Akita rose phenomenally from 1988, after then Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI), as Prefect of the Congregation for

the Doctrine of the Faith, declared the Lady of Akita events to be reliable and worthy of belief. But so dire were the prophecies woven into the Marian apparitions in Akita that local authorities began to the pilgrimages with apprehension rather than awe. They felt that the messages to Sister Agnes were sowing panic more than spirituality. Today, in view of the fact that the Marian Shrine in Yuwazadai just outside Akitalies near the epicenter of the March 11 earthquake and has been destroyed by the accompanying tsunami, people of faith cannot help but wonder if their belief had not been wanting.

There is no way of knowing this, of course, just as there is no way of ascertaining in any absolute way if the scientific calculation of probabilities for a given project like nuclear plants has been adequate to the complexity of latent structures. It is interesting that the crisis at the Fukushima nuclear station came not so much in the form of a direct hit to the reactors by the earthquake and tsunami, but, ironically, as interruption in the external power supply that ran the cooling system. The plant's standby generators automatically kicked in as soon as the city's power supply was knocked down by the tsunami. But unfortunately, they also broke down a few minutes after activation. Emergency batteries were then brought in to re-start the cooling system but they too proved insufficient. The improbable thus became probable.

In many ways, religion is immune to such immanent failures. Viewed from the perspective of society, rather than from its own self-descriptions, religion operates as a way of managing anxiety over the inevitability of uncertainty and contingency. One either believes or does not believe. To the one who believes, no proof is needed. Religious belief draws its strength not from new facts, but from ceaseless interpretation that brings back the faithful to God. To the skeptical, on the other hand, no proof is sufficient. Science progresses by continuously undermining its own conclusions.

Ours remains basically a religious culture. Our typical orientation is to cope with life's incurable vulnerability. We are resigned to nature's dangers, and

we seek not to compound these by taking risks that rest on fallible human knowledge. The only “risk” we permit ourselves is the risk of believing that God or the Spirit will protect us. This gives us hope, and from this we draw our perseverance and strength.

I saw this for myself last Friday in two very different places in Angeles City. In one, the church of “Apung Mamacalulu” (Lord of the Holy Sepulcher), a site of intense folk devotion, I watched people, mostly from society’s impoverished classes, rest their heads on the feet of Christ, pouring all the grief, frustration, and anxieties. They gently knock on the wooden case of the statue, weep, and beg for mercy and relief from whatever ails them. Then they go out of the church, into a world of tiangges and worldly goods, chastened by their simple faith, ready to face the burdens of an uncertain world.

In another part of the city, just below the Abacan Bridge, I found myself in conversation with the semi-nomadic water-dwelling Bajaus who have put up shanties on stilts along the river. Many of them are from the Sama ethnic group that used to live in Basilan, Tawi-tawi and the Sulu group of islands. The conflict in Mindanao and the depredations of the Abu Sayyaf forced them to abandon their homes and to migrate to Manila, and later to Batangas, Laguna, Zambales, and Pampanga. Japan’s nuclear crisis is farthest from their minds. They worry about food, livelihood, and the schooling of their children, but they are unfazed by the coming rains, floods, and typhoons. If the city will let them stay, by the grace of their gods, they will look after themselves.

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