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Noli me tangere

Most Filipinos will recognize the Latin phrase “Noli me tangere” as the title of Jose Rizal’s first novel, rather than as a biblical line from the gospel of St. John (20:17). In English, it is usually rendered as “Touch me not.” This was what the risen Jesus told the startled Mary Magdalene when she tried to approach him after he had called her name. The meaning of this utterance has been the subject of much dispute, not least because it appears only in John and not in the other gospels.

When later he appeared before his disciples, Jesus invited the doubting Thomas to touch his wounds. Yet he would not allow Mary, whose faith needed no confirmation, to hold him. Why? Was it because she was a woman and not one of the original disciples, and therefore unworthy of being the first witness to Jesus’ triumph over death? Or was it because “noli me tangere” meant something else other than “do not touch me”?

Curiously, Rizal’s particular use of this phrase as the title of his novel might give us a better understanding of its meaning. I remember as a child asking my father what “noli me tangere” meant. He had come home one day with a freshly printed hardbound edition of Charles Derbyshire’s translation titled “The social cancer.” Proudly, he presented it to me as if it was the most precious book in the world, enunciating every syllable in that enchanting phrase “noli me tangere.” He uttered it as if it was a magical incantation. “What language is that?” I asked him. “Latin for ‘touch me not’,” he replied. What’s that got to do with cancer, I pressed, pointing to the English title of the book. He answered: “The cancer of our society in Rizal’s time was already so advanced that no doctor would touch it anymore.”

That perspective stayed with me throughout my first early reading of the Noli. My father clearly took the cancer analogy from Rizal's own prefatory dedication, "To my country." In it, Rizal had written: "Recorded in the history of human suffering are cancers of such malignant character that even minor contact aggravates them, engendering overwhelming pain.... Therefore, because I desire your good health... I will do with you what the ancients did with their infirmed: they placed them on the steps of their temples so that each in his own way could invoke a divinity that might offer a cure." (From H. Augenbraum's translation)

But if the delicate condition of the country as a severely battered and wounded body was all that Rizal had wished to call attention to, other lines from the Bible could have done just as well. A suitable candidate would have been Jesus' loud cry on the ninth hour as he was hanging from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Or, "Into your hands, Lord, I commend my spirit."

Later in life, I had a chance to re-read Rizal's novel in the context of his other writings. I came to realize that the national hero was not merely dissecting the malignant state of Philippine society under Spanish rule. He was also heralding the emergence of a new nation from the decadence of colonial society. He was not calling upon a god who would offer a cure but upon a people that, he hoped, would redeem it from its miserable state.

Nowhere was Noli's intent more clear than in Rizal's sharp polemic against the Spanish writer Vicente Barrantes, who had published an essay attacking Rizal and distorting the message of his novel. In his rejoinder to Barrantes, Rizal wrote: "Yes, I have depicted the social sores of 'my homeland'; in it are 'pessimism and darkness' and it is because I see much infamy in my country; there the wretched equal in number the imbeciles.... There is indeed much corruption over there,

maybe more than anywhere else, but it is because to the soil's own rubbish has been added the dross of birds of passage and the corpses that the sea deposits on the beach. And because of the existence of this corruption, I have written my "Noli me tangere," I ask for reforms so that the little good that there is may be saved and the bad may be redeemed."

The complete Latin sentence from which Rizal had lifted the title of his novel was: "Dicit ei Iesus noli me tangere nondum enim ascendi ad Patrem meum." The New International Version of the Bible translates it thus: "Jesus said, 'Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to my Father'." "Do not hold on to me" is vastly different in meaning from "Do not touch me." In other versions, the phrase is rendered more clearly as "Do not cling to me." This seems to me to indicate that as a human being, Jesus indeed died, and rose from the grave, but had not yet at that point ascended to heaven. The important thing is that he had conquered death. Addressing himself to Mary Magdalene, Jesus continues: "Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

I have a strong sense that Rizal understood "noli me tangere" in precisely this sense. The patient, Filipinas, is dying, but it is on its way to its spiritual rebirth. Rizal tells his readers, Spaniards and Filipinos alike, not to cling to its morbid state. Let it go rather, and let it find its redemption. Far from grieving or merely lamenting the country's sorry state, Rizal was sounding out a call to action.

In Luke's narration, the two Marys went to the tomb early on the day after Sabbath, bringing with them spices with which to anoint Jesus' body. They could not find his corpse. Instead, they encountered two men in gleaming clothes seated by the empty tomb who told them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!" (Luke 24:6)

Happy Easter!

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