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## “Redeeming the Religion” of the Colonizer: Exploring Filipino Worship in the U.S.

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## **“Redeeming the Religion” of the Colonizer: Exploring Filipino Worship in the U.S.**

By Gabrielle Poma

**Abstract:** This paper aims to serve as an introduction to what the author considers a staple but often overlooked demographic in the pews of Catholic Churches in the United States: Filipinos and Filipino Americans. We begin with a brief overview of Filipino indigenous traditions, Spain’s colonization of the Philippines, and migration trends from the Philippines to the United States. We then explore how Filipino Catholics emerged from intimate devotional gatherings in households and hidden corners of their churches to assert their communities’ needs through parish leadership and civic engagement. In the public forum and thousands of miles from the Philippines, Filipinos have been able to keep their cultural heritage alive through their children and grandchildren while sharing it with those outside of their ethnic community. Woven throughout this narrative are definitions of Filipino cultural values, such as *bahala na* (“leave it to God”) and *utang na loob* (reciprocity). Drawing upon a mix of sociological, historical, and theological sources, this paper is inspired by liberation theology and specifically Albert J. Raboteau’s essay “Relating Race and Religion,” which examines the ways in which enslaved African Americans challenged white oppression through the lens of religion. Citing various communities from across the U.S. as well as examples from the author’s own life, this paper ultimately seeks to present Filipino spiritual life as reclamation of a history intrinsically fraught with colonialism and forced assimilation.

**Keywords:** Liberation Theology, Filipino and Filipino American, Postcolonialism, Spirituality, Community

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### **Introduction: On Being Filipino American (but Mostly American)**

Sociologists vary in how they differentiate among first generation, second generation, and the half generations in between, but there has never been much ambiguity in how I self-identify. My mother and her family came to the United States when she was thirteen; my father was born here. I was born and raised in the Bay Area in a suburb that is characterized by blue collar residents, family-run businesses, and rich diversity. I was never short on Filipino peers, most of whom were born to parents who migrated well into adulthood. Some of my classmates themselves were born in the Philippines and spent the first few years of their lives there. They knew much more about the food, clothing, customs, and language than I did. In elementary school, those who were bilingual or at least understood the various dialects of the islands tossed around Tagalog slang and brought lunchboxes filled with foods I had never eaten at home. Simply put, I have never felt “Filipino” enough.

In February 2022, my mother’s father passed away. We held his funeral a few weeks later, and I served as the cantor. I love being a minister of music. It feels like I’m offering a piece of myself to the community that not everyone can, and it is humbling to be entrusted with the community’s worship in even a small way. That is doubly true when my family is involved. When I sing in Tagalog, a language my cousins and I neither speak nor understand, I can resurrect family memories of childhoods spent in the Philippines, a country I have never visited. From behind the music stand, I watched as the funeral mass connected even my non-practicing family members with the religion of our culture—my grandfather himself was not a churchgoer. Whatever people’s personal views or practices, the liturgy is still embedded within my whole family: they know when to sit, stand, and kneel; they receive the Eucharist because they are still full-fledged members of the Catholic Church. They still mark the seasons of life through ritual.

This brief snapshot of my family life could be easily copied and pasted onto many a Filipino household in the United States. The ever-growing population of Filipinos in the U.S., both first-generation immigrants and those who were raised here, is a subject of interest for sociologists. Filipinos occupy a unique cultural space because of various influences: Spanish, Japanese, American, indigenous, Islamic, Catholic—the list goes on. But the dominant force is *Western*. As a young Filipino American, I find that our struggle is ownership. Our parents were often compelled to Americanize, even in the Philippines, and so we are exposed to the culture of our ancestors selectively: we eat the food but do not

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speak the language, we wear the special-occasion clothes but do not know their history. It is so difficult to disentangle “Filipino-ness” from its history of colonization and forced assimilation that many of us find ourselves in a complicated relationship with the religion that we inherited.

This paper draws its name from Albert J. Raboteau’s essay “Relating Race and Religion,” in which Raboteau identifies four models used by enslaved African Americans to challenge white oppression while struggling for their own survival and declaring their dignity. Raboteau names the first model “Redeeming the Religion of the Master,” which “casts the history of African Americans against the backdrop of biblical narrative, especially the story of Exodus, in order to fashion a map of meaning for black people as a specially chosen people whose destiny is ‘to save the soul of the nation.’”<sup>1</sup> This approach to religion was sparked by enslaved peoples looking beyond Christianity’s association with their oppressors and realizing that one of its core values, egalitarianism, indicated that their liberation was divinely willed. Of course, this is unique to Black American history and lived experience, but I posit that it can tell us that Filipinos navigate the religion of the colonizer by accepting that history with all its complications and enriching it with new meaning.

Thus, by placing this internal struggle in the context of Catholic worship, this paper will explore how spiritual practice provides the foundation on which Filipinos embrace their culture, transmit it to younger generations, and share it with those outside our heritage. I will begin with a brief overview of Filipino migration patterns, followed by an exploration of Filipino Catholic devotional activity, both private and public. I will then present some case studies that demonstrate the permeation of Catholicism in all aspects of life for Filipinos, and I will close by reflecting on how the Filipino experience can contribute to the field of liberation theology. Put concisely, I am guided by these questions: how do Filipinos reclaim a religion that was historically forced on us? How do we create a distinct space for ourselves and affirm our value as an overlooked minority group? Most importantly, how do we transform that history into one of vibrant triumph?

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<sup>1</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, “Relating Race and Religion: Four Historical Models,” in *Uncommon Faithfulness: The Black Catholic Experience*, ed. M. Shawn Copeland, LaReine-Marie Mosely, and Albert J. Raboteau (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2009), 23.

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## **Filipino History and Migration**

Though Catholicism is perhaps the foremost characteristic of Filipino life, a religious history of the Philippines would be incomplete without its pre-colonial origins. Prior to the arrival of the Spanish in 1521, both indigenous religions and Islam were practiced on the islands. Filipino indigenous rituals invoked the god *Batala*, in addition to other spirits, gods, and goddesses.<sup>2</sup> Also called *Bathalang Maykapal*, *Batala* was worshiped as the Supreme Being, even within this polytheistic atmosphere.<sup>3</sup> With their surroundings permeated by omnipresent deities, “Filipinos had no temples or particular places of worship or sacrifice.”<sup>4</sup> As with many ancient cultures, the indigenous peoples of the Philippines shared the mythology of their gods and expressed their beliefs through songs that were passed from generation to generation.<sup>5</sup>

When Miguel López de Legazpi landed on the islands in 1565, Spanish colonization began in earnest. He “arrived armed with Augustinian missionaries, who were soon followed by Franciscans, Jesuits, and Dominicans.”<sup>6</sup> The Spanish *padres* seized control of the educational, military, health, and civic systems.<sup>7</sup> By the time the United States won the Spanish-American War in 1898, and with it the Philippines, the Spanish had spent three centuries stealing the land of the indigenous peoples and destroying any trace of their religion. As we will explore in further detail later, the Spanish indeed left their indelible mark on Filipino religiosity; many of the distinctive, popular Filipino Catholic devotions we observe today are Spanish in origin, leading to a dilemma of identity for Filipino Americans who wish to honor their ancestral lands and practices.

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<sup>2</sup> Glenda Tibe Bonifacio and Vivienne S. M. Angeles, “Building Communities through Faith: Filipino Catholics in Philadelphia and Alberta,” in *Gender, Religion, and Migration: Pathways of Integration*, ed. Glenda Tibe Bonifacio and Vivienne S. M. Angeles (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010), 257.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Rios, “A Continuing Theology from the Margins: Dialogue between Filipino Culture and Popular Religion as a Tool for Liberation,” *Worship* 85, no. 2 (March 2011): 119, EBSCOhost.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew Rios, “A Continuing Theology from the Margins,” 119.

<sup>5</sup> Rios, 119.

<sup>6</sup> Joaquin L. Gonzalez and Claudine del Rosario, “Counterhegemony Finds a Place in a Hegemon: Activism through Filipino American Churches,” in *Religion at the Corner of Bliss and Nirvana: Politics, Identity, and Faith in New Migrant Communities*, ed. Lois Ann Lrentzen, et al. (Durham: Duke University Press), 292.

<sup>7</sup> Joaquin L. Gonzalez and Claudine del Rosario, “Counterhegemony Finds a Place in Hegemon,” 292.

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Immediately following the Spanish-American War, the U.S. was met with insurrection by a people who ached for freedom from Western imperialism. From 1899 to 1902, the U.S. army killed over 1.5 million people during the Philippine-American War as they quelled the unrest and swiftly implemented a program of assimilation through which American educators called Thomasites “established an American educational system and English as the primary teaching language.”<sup>8</sup> Even now, English is still the main language used in an educational system that has remained very much Western.

It was during the opening of the twentieth century that the first of four waves of Filipino migration took place. This venture was undertaken by the *pensionados*, “one hundred young men specially selected by the Philippine government to attend American universities and return as leaders.”<sup>9</sup> The second wave, and the first major one, occurred in the 1920s when “employers in Hawaii and along the West Coast began to recruit Filipino laborers to replace Chinese and Japanese laborers.”<sup>10</sup> In Hawaii, those laborers worked on sugar plantations, and on California farms, they worked in tandem with Mexican immigrants. The third wave was driven by U.S. military recruitment during World War II, and the fourth and most significant wave to date was a consequence of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965.

The Immigration Act of 1965 had two major goals: “to relieve occupational shortages in the United States and to achieve family reunification.”<sup>11</sup> Though many entered the U.S. by way of the latter, the majority came for professional reasons. In contrast to the students and laborers of the early 1900s, post-1965 immigrants were distinguished by their level of education. They were “teachers, doctors, nurses, engineers, lawyers, scientists, and others fitting the description of ‘professional, technical and kindred workers’ indicated in the Immigration Act.”<sup>12</sup> These legislative changes in the U.S. occurred parallel to a seismic shift in the Catholic world with the Second Vatican Council and its teachings; the

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<sup>8</sup> Gonzalez and Rosario, 293.

<sup>9</sup> Kersten Bayt Priest, “New Immigrant Filipinos Bring Changes to Their Parish,” in *This Side of Heaven: Race, Ethnicity, and Christian Faith*, ed. Robert J. Priest and Alvaro L. Nieves (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 244-245.

<sup>10</sup> Kathleen Garces-Foley, “From the Melting Pot to the Multicultural Table: Filipino Catholics in Los Angeles,” *American Catholic Studies* 120, no. 1 (2009): 33, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44195203>.

<sup>11</sup> Glenda Tibe Bonifacio and Vivienne S. M. Angeles, “Building Communities through Faith,” 259.

<sup>12</sup> Bonifacio and Angeles, 260.

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Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes* recognized the value of non-Eurocentric worship and encouraged a meeting of culture and faith.<sup>13</sup> In 1987, in that post-Vatican II world that envisioned unity-in-diversity, John Paul II canonized the first Filipino saint: San Lorenzo Ruiz.

More recent legislation admitting U.S. veterans has contributed to the ever-growing Filipino population in the U.S., however belated such recognition may be. The Immigration Act of 1990 provided for “the naturalization of surviving Philippine-born veterans of the United States Armed Forces in the Far East, Philippine Army, Philippine Scout Rangers and recognized guerilla units who served between September 1, 1939 and December 31, 1946.”<sup>14</sup> Though the West Coast, and California in particular, are often associated with a significant Filipino population, this paper will touch on Filipino communities in locations that may be surprising: Philadelphia, Chicago, Houston, and even New Jersey and northeastern Florida. Some of these locations, such as Philadelphia with its naval bases, garnered a Filipino population in the 1990s through military connections.<sup>15</sup> Though post-1965 Filipino immigrants came to the U.S. for a variety of reasons and settled in a variety of diasporic communities, all found solace in their faith. But despite their devotion *to* the Church, widespread prejudice during those first years of contemporary migration often barred Filipino entry *into* the church. Thus, we begin our exploration of Filipino ritual not in the public sphere of the parish, but in the privacy of the home.

### **Celebrations Outside the Church**

Theologian Rachel Bundang was raised in northeast Florida, where she experienced firsthand what she describes as “an alternative moral community.”<sup>16</sup> This unconventional practice is the novena circuit, also called prayer circles, in which families take turns hosting a statue of the *Santo Niño*, the infant Jesus, for a week. Throughout the week, the community gathers in that home, where “prayers are recited in various languages—English, Spanish, Tagalog, and other Philippine dialects—and last for at least an

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<sup>13</sup> Kathleen Garces-Foley, “From the Melting Pot to the Multicultural Table,” 42.

<sup>14</sup> Glenda Tibe Bonifacio and Vivienne S. M. Angeles, “Building Communities through Faith,” 260.

<sup>15</sup> Bonifacio and Angeles, 261.

<sup>16</sup> Rachel A. R. Bundang, “May You Storm Heaven with Your Prayers: Devotions to Mary and Jesus in Filipino American Catholic Life,” in *Off the Menu: Asian and Asian North American Women’s Religion and Theology*, ed. Rita Nakashima Brock, et al. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 89.

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hour; they include the full rosary, some litanies, prayers to Jesus, St. Francis, St. Michael the Archangel, and various faces of Mary.<sup>17</sup> At the end of the week, the coordinator of the novena circuit, usually a local matriarch, leads the host and the “guest” to the next household and host. In keeping with the trends of Filipino migration, the majority of the participants are “post-1965 first-generation women averaging forty years of age or more,”<sup>18</sup> many of whom came to northeast Florida “mostly through some affiliation with the military installations there.”<sup>19</sup> When these prayers occur, there is an “open door” policy. “One need not know the host or be invited; it is enough to call, find out the location, and show up to pray.”<sup>20</sup> It is a community practice to the core.

Two distinct devotions can be identified through the prayer circles: *Santo Niño* and Mary. The Council of Trent (1545-1563), which occurred during the first decades of Spanish colonization of the Philippines, “clarified and codified doctrines, teachings, and practices they considered central to the faith, including the honoring of Mary and the saints.”<sup>21</sup> Devotion to *Santo Niño* also originated in Spain at this time. These teachings were brought to the Filipinos under Spain “and then further reinforced through subsequent dogmas promulgated during the First Vatican Council.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, these well-known characteristics of Filipino faith can be traced back to the very beginnings of Catholicism in the Philippines itself. These prayer circles are remnants of a colonial history that has spanned centuries and crossed continents.

The phenomenon of novena circuits in northeast Florida is not just a demonstration of living history. They “constitute an island of stability in a place vastly different from the home left behind; in them, devotees exert control and assert their worth through diligent participation.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, prayer circles are a source of both pride and solace for a diasporic community. Amidst the chaos and rejection that comes with uprooting one’s life, these home-centered devotions provide a sense of ownership and familiarity. Those who were previously strangers, who may hail from different islands

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<sup>17</sup> Rachel A. R. Bundang, “May You Storm Heaven with Your Prayers,” 91.

<sup>18</sup> Bundang, 89.

<sup>19</sup> Bundang, 94.

<sup>20</sup> Bundang, 91.

<sup>21</sup> Bundang, 92.

<sup>22</sup> Bundang, 93.

<sup>23</sup> Rachel A. R. Bundang, “May You Storm Heaven with Your Prayers,” 94.





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and speak different dialects, are able to connect through prayers that they know by heart and a shared meal.

At St. Ansgar Parish in Chicago, a similar practice formed for much the same reason. The parish was founded in the late 1950s by German, Irish, Polish, and Italian descendants. In 1960, the township was 99.5 percent white, but in 1980 over a thousand Filipino residents were identified, and by 2000, the number had grown to over three thousand.<sup>24</sup> In response to racism from their neighbors and a pastor who resisted their efforts to establish a formal Catholic Filipino group, the would-be parishioners of St. Ansgar turned inward. They gathered in each other's homes every other week "to share devotional worship in Tagalog and English for their three resident saints: San Lorenzo, Our Lady of Fatima, and *Santo Niño*—as well as socialize and plan for various events."<sup>25</sup> Social events such as dinner dances were permitted to take place in the banquet hall below St. Ansgar's church. However, Filipinos still existed on the periphery: "ethnic music or food was done solely for special private occasions—to celebrate weddings, graduations, and so on."<sup>26</sup> Despite that, they still raised and contributed funds to the parish. After overhearing these festivities for some time, the white parishioners' interest was piqued: they invited the Filipino community members to sing in their liturgies, which ushered in a new chapter of welcome and eventually enabled Filipinos to rise to leadership within the parish.

### **Ritual Within the Church**

Before we delve into what ritual and worship look like for Filipinos, we would do well to ask how we are to incorporate culture within liturgy if there is an issue in defining culture in the first place. Fr. Manuel "Manoling" Francisco is a prolific Filipino and Jesuit musician who has written on the struggle of identifying what it is to be Filipino and, more specifically, what it is to be a Filipino Catholic. He acknowledges what the Filipino faithful have long grappled with: a cultural memory—and thus, an inherited religion—that is inseparable from centuries of colonization. If we trace our roots beyond Spanish influence, the Philippines still comprises hundreds of islands, which gives rise to multiple ethnic

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<sup>24</sup> Kersten Bayt Priest, "New Immigrant Filipinos Bring Changes to Their Parish," 245.

<sup>25</sup> Priest, 246.

<sup>26</sup> Priest, 246.

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and linguistic groups. Estimates for the number of dialects spoken on the archipelago range from 110 to 170. If a parish were to implement a Filipino mass with the best of intentions and offer the liturgy bilingually in English and Tagalog, they would run the risk of isolating Filipinos who speak a different dialect.<sup>27</sup> In fact, those Filipinos are likely used to celebrating the liturgy in English alone. In terms of music, the instruments indigenous to Filipino culture are neither mainstream nor collective. “Most Filipinos are more familiar with the guitar introduced by our Spanish colonizers than with the *Kalinga gangsas*, and they are more comfortable with the western musical scale than with the indigenous scale of the *Maranao kulintang*.”<sup>28</sup> That is to say, what is “authentic” is not always actually “ours,” and what is “ours” is not universal.

Perhaps the most prominent embodiment of this idea is the *Simbang Gabi* (night Mass), a series of Masses celebrated across the nine days leading up to Christmas, usually taking place early in the morning—hence another name for it in Spanish, *Misa de Gallo* (Mass of the Rooster). This is a staple celebration in any parish with a strong Filipino presence, one that attracts even non-Filipino devotees, yet “there is nothing in the rubrics or the readings or the liturgy of these dawn eucharistic celebrations that distinguishes them from liturgies celebrated elsewhere on these same days.”<sup>29</sup> The tradition itself “was begun in the Philippines by the Spanish friars in the seventeenth century.”<sup>30</sup> Still, few today would argue that *Simbang Gabi* is not distinctly Filipino. In 1999, the Filipino Pastoral Ministry Program in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles broke off from the Asian Pacific Ministry Office after roughly ten years under its umbrella and established the separate Office of Filipino Ministry.<sup>31</sup> Spearheaded by its director, Good Shepherd Sister Mary Christina Sevilla, its first major focus was pushing the implementation of this pre-Christmas tradition. “In 2001, one hundred three parishes held *Simbang Gabi* masses in the archdiocese.”<sup>32</sup> That year, Padre Serra Parish in Camarillo hosted an “Adopt a Parol” event to

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<sup>27</sup> Even in my own family, my parents each speak/understand one dialect—Ilocano and Tagalog—and do not understand each other’s dialect.

<sup>28</sup> Manuel V. Francisco, “The Challenge: Embodying the Spirit of a Culture in Liturgy,” *Pastoral Music* 7, no. 4 (April 2003): 32, ProQuest.

<sup>29</sup> Manuel V. Francisco, “The Challenge,” 32.

<sup>30</sup> Kathleen Garces-Foley, “From the Melting Pot to the Multicultural Table,” 51.

<sup>31</sup> Garces-Foley, 46.

<sup>32</sup> Garces-Foley, 51.

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incentivize *Simbang Gabi* attendance among its white and Latino parishioners.<sup>33</sup> This ornament, representing the star of Bethlehem which draws its name from the Spanish *farol* (lantern), could be hung and dedicated to a family member. With its family-centered appeal and its visual connection to the story of the season, this event served to “move *Simbang Gabi* and the small Filipino community from the margins to the mainstream of the parish.”<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, on the other side of the country in New Jersey, Father John Cryan welcomed the influx of Filipino parishioners by way of *Simbang Gabi*. Like St. Ansgar Parish in Chicago, Cryan’s parish was mostly made up of Irish-, Italian-, and Polish-Americans until a wave of Asian immigration, predominantly Filipino, began in the early 1990s.<sup>35</sup> Cryan and his parish staff invited the new parishioners to a meet-and-greet at the Parish Center and, over the course of a few meetings, engaged in conversation regarding “issues of welcoming, hospitality, and comfort.”<sup>36</sup> For these recent immigrants, the adaptation of *Simbang Gabi* in their new parish in the United States soothed the loneliness of being away from the familiar and the friendly during the holidays. “On Christmas Eve morning, a potluck breakfast followed the last Mass of the novena. The Filipino community prepared the various native foods associated with Christmas. Many Filipino and non-Filipino parishioners attended both the novena and the breakfast.”<sup>37</sup> In this capacity, ritual is an evocation of home.

When winter has come and gone and the warm weather sets in, Filipino Catholics turn their attention to another lengthy celebration: the *Flores de Mayo*, or “Flowers of May.” As Bundang demonstrates with her novena circuits, there is endless possibility for Filipino devotion to Mary; the entire month of May is dedicated to her. In the spirit of the Blessed Mother, the rituals of *Flores de Mayo* are geared toward incorporating the younger generations in the festivities. At Cryan’s parish, “each day during May a different group of children places flowers around the image, while adults lead them in the recitation of the appropriate mystery of the rosary.”<sup>38</sup> The monthlong devotional ends with “an outdoor procession in honor of the Blessed Mother, involving all the children who participated

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<sup>33</sup> Garces-Foley, 51.

<sup>34</sup> Garces-Foley, 51.

<sup>35</sup> John Cryan, “Translating Hospitality: Welcoming Filipinos into the Parish,” *Church* 20, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 31, doi:10.1177/0037768616654237.

<sup>36</sup> John Cryan, “Translating Hospitality,” 31.

<sup>37</sup> Cryan, 32.

<sup>38</sup> Cryan, 32-33.



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during the month...joined by their parents, siblings, and other parishioners. The procession returns to the church for the singing of evening prayer.”<sup>39</sup> More generally, Sister Myrna Tordillo, Assistant Director of Asian and Pacific Island Affairs at USCCB sums up the month as such: “A statue of Mary is crowned by a child dressed in white in the presence of other white clad children who bring flowers to offer to Mary.”<sup>40</sup>

Embedded within these two distinct rituals are what Tordillo describes as “key cultural and faith patterns,” foremost among which are family orientation and meal orientation. There are many more, but I would argue that this main pair engenders the other values that Tordillo mentions, such as “respect for elders” and “camaraderie.” Paired with devout faith, these are the values that enable the Church’s role to extend beyond Filipinos’ spiritual lives and into their social lives. Jocelyn Sideco, writing for the *National Catholic Reporter*, reflects on the impact of the local parish in this light as her parents celebrate their 45<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. She recalls how her parents raised her and her three sisters as churchgoers: “We went to Sunday Masses and on days of obligation, and we worked and volunteered there, too...the Canossian sisters took our family under their wing.”<sup>41</sup> Beyond the household, the parish also shaped her parents’ social life; they were part of a network of family friends, a *barkada*, who raised children together and celebrated each other’s milestones: “From the fall festival to cioppino night, St. Patrick’s dinner dance and the May crowning, they all had found community—friendship and fellowship—with one another.”<sup>42</sup> Sideco’s parents even catered their own celebratory lunch for their parish after they received their anniversary blessing at the end of Sunday Mass.

Sideco’s childhood captures yet another tenet of Filipino Catholicism: it is intergenerational. Analyzing Filipino Catholic communities in Philadelphia, Bonifacio and Angeles write, “Filipinos from the Delaware Valley come to St. Augustine Church for the eleven o’clock Mass on Sundays which is followed by a novena to *Santo Niño* and afterwards, a fellowship lunch catered by various Filipino organizations in the church social hall.”<sup>43</sup> It is during those socials that the children “learn traditional

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<sup>39</sup> Cryan, 32-33.

<sup>40</sup> Myrna Tordillo, “What Every Vocation Director Should Know about Filipino Families,” *Horizon* 40, no. 4 (Fall 2015): 23, EBSCOhost.

<sup>41</sup> Jocelyn A. Sideco, “45 Years and a Community We Call Church,” *National Catholic Reporter* 48, no. 16 (May 25, 2012): 6a, EBSCOhost.

<sup>42</sup> Jocelyn A. Sideco, “45 Years and a Community We Call Church,” 6a.

<sup>43</sup> Glenda Tibe Bonifacio and Vivienne S. M. Angeles, “Building Communities through Faith,” 262.

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dances of the Philippines, thus making St. Augustine Church a place for the reproduction and perpetuation not only of Philippine Catholic rituals but Philippine culture as well.”<sup>44</sup> The same is true at San Patricio’s parish in San Francisco, where they “sing church songs in Tagalog and go to catechism classes where their parents feel that they learn Filipino values such as *galang* (respect for elders).”<sup>45</sup> At St. Ansgar’s in Chicago, there are all kinds of ways for the youth to contribute to these gatherings, even if it is not through performance. “Those who do not dance set up audio equipment, operate video cameras, roll audiotape, beat drums, clack the *tinikling* poles or help make and collect artifacts.”<sup>46</sup> Everyone is a stakeholder in the life of the Filipino Catholic community.

There is unspeakable value in transmitting culture to the younger generations through art and ritual. Art and ritual bridge the communication gap that the old and young may find difficult to cross otherwise, which in turn promotes interconnectedness within the social network. For American-born Filipinos like myself, the cultural sharing that happens within the parish fosters a deeper appreciation of ancestral heritage when language and geographical proximity are out of the question. And when the culture lives on, even an ocean away from the islands where it originated, the community lives on too. Bundang, tracing the demographic trends of her childhood home in northeast Florida, writes, “from the 1980s onward...the Filipino population shifted its weight, with an increasingly heavier count among second- and third-generation families. Now the children and grandchildren of the generation represented by these prayer groups’ participants are giving the community its newfound and ever-deepening stability.”<sup>47</sup> That stability, nurtured by the intertwined social and spiritual nature of the parish, is what gives Filipino Catholics the courage to assert their presence and needs within the wider community.

### **Building and Supporting Community**

Before delving into the public sphere of civic engagement, it would be beneficial to demonstrate the centrality of religious devotion in the individual life of the Filipino. A study of 10 female Filipino breast cancer survivors in Northern California who averaged 54 years of age, were born in the

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<sup>44</sup> Bonifacio and Angeles, 262.

<sup>45</sup> Joaquin L. Gonzalez and Claudine del Rosario, “Counterhegemony Finds a Place in Hegemon,” 299.

<sup>46</sup> Kersten Bayt Priest, “New Immigrant Filipinos Bring Changes to Their Parish,” 252.

<sup>47</sup> Rachel A. R. Bundang, “May You Storm heaven with Your Prayers,” 95.

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Philippines, and immigrated to the U.S. as adults found that prayer was central to coping with illness. Through these interviews, the researchers found that prayer had a threefold function: comforting and healing the self, support from loved ones, and support from the wider Catholic community.

Underscoring these themes are two more Filipino cultural expressions that Sr. Tordillo identifies: *bahala na* (“never mind what happens” or “leave it to God”) and *utang na loob* (reciprocity).<sup>48</sup> The former indicates the mindset that gives prayer its weight, and the latter sums up prayer as a form of currency to be traded among loved ones. Given this collectivism, it is no surprise that women felt that the Church “brought them closer to God and to others in their community and provided support through diagnosis and treatment.”<sup>49</sup> Specifically, “for many participants, priests and nuns not only provided spiritual support, but were also the people to whom many turned for spiritual guidance, encouragement, strength and assistance with making peace with their diagnosis.”<sup>50</sup> The personal piety that is common to many individuals creates an opportunity for dynamic exchange with one another.

That assistance also takes a more active approach, especially in times of disaster. In the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, roughly 28,000 Filipino Americans evacuated Alabama, Florida, Mississippi, and New Orleans. “The majority...many of whom were/are first-generation immigrants, ended up in Houston en route to the shelter of the Astrodome.”<sup>51</sup> Upon their arrival, they were greeted by local Filipinos holding signs in English and Tagalog, relocated from the Astrodome within a few hours, and placed under the care of the local Filipino Houstonian community. That cultural richness proved to be the key in responding to the needs of the evacuees:

Given the fact that Filipinos represent a rather diverse population, coming from over 7,000 islands, and bring with them a host of regional linguistic and provincial differences, these community members and their connections to local churches were vital to grassroots mobilizations across these diverse and often conflicting regional Filipino groups and

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<sup>48</sup> Myrna Tordillo, “What Every Vocation Director Should Know about Filipino Families,” 22.

<sup>49</sup> Regina A. Lagman et al., “‘Leaving It to God’: Religion and Spirituality among Filipina Immigrant Breast Cancer Survivors,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 53, no. 2 (April 2014): 457, doi:10.1007/s10943-012-9648-z.

<sup>50</sup> Regina A. Lagman et al., “Leaving It to God,” 457.

<sup>51</sup> Stephen Michael Cherry and Amy Lucas, “Faith against the Storm: Filipino Immigrant Mobilizations for Hurricane Katrina Evacuees,” *Social Compass* 63, no. 3 (September 2016): 355, doi:10.1177/0037768616654237.



organizations. These individuals were well known, well connected, and well respected across these communities. Rallying around a sense of urgency for their fellow Filipinos or *kababayans* (Tagalog) and drawing on a sense of obligations toward them, what many Filipinos would call the *bayanihan* (Tagalog) spirit, the meeting of community leaders brought about swift action and the mobilization of considerable resources.<sup>52</sup>

These leaders formed the Filipino Disaster Relief of Texas (FDRT) as part of the National Federation of Filipino American Associations (NaFFAA), which allowed them to use local parish directories and find Filipino host families for the evacuees.<sup>53</sup> FDRT also enlisted Houston's HOPE (Helping Other People through Encouragement) health clinic to sponsor an emergency clinic, for which they found a building and which was staffed by Filipino nurses and doctors who volunteered their time. "The clinic was up and running within a week and either free of charge or based on a sliding scale for those who actually had insurance."<sup>54</sup>

The community's efforts also looked beyond immediate relief and toward reestablishing the displaced families. By leveraging FDRT's connections, they then went on to "facilitate paperwork for new Philippine passports, file documents of authenticity needed for US federal aid (FEMA), register children for school, and facilitate the finding of new jobs."<sup>55</sup> The swiftness and effectiveness of the response is astonishing: FDRT and its collaborators "both from within and outside the Filipino community were able to raise well over \$20,000."<sup>56</sup> A survey of first-generation Filipino Houstonians "suggests roughly 37 percent donated food or clothing during this time, 58 percent gave money, and 26 percent volunteered in some capacity."<sup>57</sup> Tellingly, when asked about motivations, 48.6 percent of participants identified "religious obligation" as their number one, while 88 percent selected it within their top three.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Stephen Michael Cherry and Amy Lucas, "Faith against the Storm," 360.

<sup>53</sup> Stephen Michael Cherry and Amy Lucas, "Faith against the Storm," 361.

<sup>54</sup> Cherry and Lucas, 362.

<sup>55</sup> Cherry and Lucas, 363.

<sup>56</sup> Cherry and Lucas, 363.

<sup>57</sup> Cherry and Lucas, 361.

<sup>58</sup> Cherry and Lucas, 361.



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These first two examples came about through occasions of calamity, but that does not mean the Filipino community only mobilizes in such moments. The Filipino status as ever-growing demographic and even perpetual foreigner is indicative of a more visceral truth: there are always families and individuals uprooting their lives to come to the U.S., and when they arrive, they look to the receiving community for assistance. Returning to Philadelphia, the parish activities among Filipinos at St. Augustine Church “also connect earlier Filipino immigrants with recent arrivals and provid[e] a social network where advice on such issues as housing, employment and education of children, veteran’s benefits and social security are given.”<sup>59</sup> Gonzalez studied the same phenomenon in the context of San Patricio parish in San Francisco led by Filipino pastor Monsignor Ferdinand Santos. His congregants reside in neighborhoods whose relative affordability and proximity to countrymen come at a steep price: “The South of Market and Tenderloin are areas where petty crime, drug sales and drug use, homelessness, youth gang violence, and vandalism are all part of daily life.”<sup>60</sup>

It is within this context that the congregation of San Patricio finds refuge in their parish and its leadership. Among them are two Filipino Sisters of the Religious of the Virgin Mary (an order founded in the Philippines), as well as Filipino associate pastors.<sup>61</sup> San Patricio’s parish life is vibrant, and its members are devoted to their pastor:<sup>62</sup>

In the minds of many of his parishioners, Monsignor Santos represents a form of political, economic, and social patron (in the patron-client arrangement). In the Philippines, patrons are usually prominent citizens (e.g., the mayor or the local lawyer). Where such a structure is missing, as in the United States, the locus of power is the parish, and thus it is the monsignor who is able to influence decisions, bestow favors, and ‘bless’ community events and most importantly actions. The monsignor’s leadership in the parish and in the larger community is

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<sup>59</sup> Glenda Tibe Bonifacio and Vivienne S. M. Angeles, “Building Communities through Faith,” 262.

<sup>60</sup> Joaquin L. Gonzalez and Claudine del Rosario, “Counterhegemony Finds a Place in a Hegemon,” 299.

<sup>61</sup> Joaquin L. Gonzalez and Claudine del Rosario, “Counterhegemony Finds a Place in a Hegemon,” 300.

<sup>62</sup> Monsignor Santos was moved to San Patricio’s after his predominantly Filipino parish, St. Joseph, was closed by the archdiocese—most of the San Patricio parishioners referenced here followed Monsignor Santos from St. Joseph after its closure.

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seen through the respect that is given for his blessings. His blessings can be explicit or implicit, social or political, formal or informal, direct or indirect.<sup>63</sup>

Monsignor Santos is not just a source of spiritual nourishment—he is rich in social capital. Though some parishioners come from outside of San Francisco, “many of the older congregants [live] in low-cost housing provided by the parish and the community, such as the Alexis House and the San Lorenzo Ruiz Center.”<sup>64</sup> When they have concerns about housing, immigration, and welfare, he points them to various public and private agencies. More advantageously, they can “use him as a reference and obtain better access to services, especially from Filipino agencies.”<sup>65</sup> The Monsignor himself is on the Board of Directors at Veterans Equity Center, and parish leaders are “actively involved in neighborhood-based organizations through their Social Justice Committee and its linkages with the West Bay Filipino Multi-service Center...the South of Market Job Training Center...the Filipino Veteran’s Equity Center, [etc.]”<sup>66</sup> Just as Monsignor Santos is the implicit patron, the parish is the implicit beneficiary of all this activity, serving as the intersection of all these various organizations and their constituents.

### **Conclusion: Filipinos and Liberation Theology**

Turning once again to Raboteau, he acknowledges that “Redeeming the Religion of the Master” generates some criticism, particularly that this approach may lead to “political quietism and lethargy—too much trusting in the intervention of the biblical God.”<sup>67</sup> The same might very well be said for Filipino Catholics. Rios identifies two popular images of Christ found in the Philippines: the *Santo Kristo*, which depicts “the Lord’s body on the cross with his head bowed down and his mouth open in agony,” and the *Hesus Nazareno*, the image of “Jesus down on one knee, bearing the cross on his shoulders with a crown of thorns on his head, and a suffering look in his eyes.”<sup>68</sup> According to Rios,

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<sup>63</sup> Joaquin L. Gonzalez and Claudine del Rosario, “Counterhegemony Finds a Place in a Hegemon,” 301.

<sup>64</sup> Gonzalez and Rosario, 302.

<sup>65</sup> Gonzalez and Rosario, 302.

<sup>66</sup> Gonzalez and Rosario, 306.

<sup>67</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, “Relating Race and Religion,” 14.

<sup>68</sup> Matthew Rios, “A Continuing Theology from the Margins,” 120.

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Filipino devotion focuses on the cross, along with “the suffering and humble Christ...who is also the brother sharing the poor peoples’ struggles and sufferings.”<sup>69</sup> This Christ died in quiet submission, thinking only of harmony and humility. He cautions against such an approach, reminding its adherents that “Filipino Christology must also portray...his pre-Easter activity as he challenged, provoked, and confronted people, denouncing hypocrites, warning the rich, and proclaiming the good news to the poor.”<sup>70</sup>

Bundang offers a similar analysis and critique through the lens of Filipino devotion to Mary and the *Santo Niño*. Looking upon the Blessed Mother and the child Jesus as kin, Filipinos, Bundang says, see these figures’ power as coming from “their need to be heeded, their vulnerability at the hands of another, their powerlessness.”<sup>71</sup> Filipino spirituality reflects those qualities: “The language of this people’s faith and the rhetoric of their religious lives are not so much those of seeking political and social liberation from day-to-day disappointments and injustices but more those of seeking spiritual courage, freedom, and strength.”<sup>72</sup> What is the issue with such an approach? In Bundang’s interpretation, “there is a danger that these devotions reinforce the colonized notion of unworthiness as something to be expiated with our colonized love of—perhaps even obsession with?—martyrdom and victimhood.”<sup>73</sup> Indeed, we observed this among the Filipino cancer survivors and their *bahala na*—“leave it to God”—approach. Bundang characterizes Filipino liberation theology, if there is such a thing, as “eschatological and cosmological, toward the distant but imaginable future when God will set all things right.”<sup>74</sup>

However, I would posit that the works explored in this paper, whatever their theologian’s conclusions, point to a more prevalent, *this*-worldly reality. While popular Filipino religiosity indeed suggests one thing—a worrying complacency in God’s unknowable plans—the way they use “the system,” in this case, a European-dominated institution and liturgy forced on their ancestors centuries ago, to their advantage says quite another. Filipino civic engagement and community mobilization are

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<sup>69</sup> Rios, 126.

<sup>70</sup> Rios, 126-127.

<sup>71</sup> Rachel A. R. Bundang, “May You Storm Heaven with Your Prayers,” 97.

<sup>72</sup> Bundang, 98.

<sup>73</sup> Bundang, 99.

<sup>74</sup> Bundang, 93.

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also forms of liberation, as is the matter of lay women dominating ministry within their parishes. In fact, even if it is not widely known, female leadership in the Church is a reclamation of precolonial, indigenous Filipino practices:

Prior to the Spaniards' arrival, many indigenous tribes such as the Tagalogs in the region now known as Luzon had evolved a roughly egalitarian social order that was reflected in their mythology; men and women wielded power and held authority in equal measures. Moreover, there is a tradition of *babaylanes*, or priestesses: women (or feminized men) serving as gateways and intercessors to the divine in matters of sacred ritual.<sup>75</sup>

As indicated by the prevalence of Filipino religious leadership, lay or ordained, Catholicism tends to go hand in hand with our understanding of "Filipino-ness." Within this status quo, it is much too easy to forget how faithful Filipinos were received when they tried to enter the doors of parishes in the United States:

Coming from a Philippine society rooted in Catholicism for more than three hundred and fifty years, Filipino Americans often were denied access to sacramental marriages involving Catholic Filipino men and Catholic Caucasian women; to Christian burials involving indigents; to Sunday masses involving individual Filipinos in all-white parishes; to Catholic education involving poor brown children; and to confession involving those not able to speak English.<sup>76</sup>

We have explored examples from coast to coast, across multiple states, which show Filipinos shedding this reality and moving out of the shadows and into the center of social and spiritual life in their communities. The Church is something they gravitate toward rather than shy away from. It is the meeting place of generations, an arena in which second and third-generation young adults can combat the stereotype of complacency, relieved of the fight to survive and adapt that their parents and grandparents undertook. In turn, the older generations are emboldened by the companionship of their

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<sup>75</sup> Rachel A. R. Bundang, "May You Storm Heaven with Your Prayers," 93.

<sup>76</sup> Joaquin L. Gonzalez and Claudine del Rosario, "Counterhegemony Finds a Place in a Hegemon," 296.

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community to advocate for themselves and display their cultural traditions with pride. In this, we see Christ's role as liberator being reclaimed—gone is the suffering victim in need of liberation. Filipino worship is an enactment of proud ownership. It embraces the Church as a God-given gift to the self, to loved ones, and to the community, and, in gratitude for that gift, Filipinos use it to improve their own lot and that of others. What is more freeing than that?

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