

## SOME THOUGHTS ON "FILIPINO THEOLOGY"

*C. G. Arévalo, S.J.*

**B**efore I begin, let me first direct a brief word of thanks to all of you who have done us the honor, all of us awardees of this afternoon, of being here, after struggling through both city and campus traffic at this time of day. We appreciate how much it has cost you, our guests, to come and spend this afternoon with us. *Salamat pò.*

If I may speak for all of us, I must especially give thanks to His Eminence, Jaime Cardinal Sin, our beloved archbishop, and Her Excellency, former President Corazon Cojuangco Aquino, both of whom have so graciously accepted the university's invitation to join us at these rites. We all know the demands made on His Eminence's time. We know he will celebrate his 70th birthday exactly one month from today, but he keeps up faithfully the hectic and energy-consuming pace of his shepherd's ministry. We also know how full Mrs. Aquino's daily sched-

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Address after the conferral of the Doctorate in Humanities, *honoris causa*, on Father Catalino G. Arévalo, S.J., Academic Convocation, Ateneo de Manila University, 30 July 1998

ules are and how she has to pick and choose carefully from so many invitations which she receives. Their presence then, is a gift to us and we may not begin without acknowledging this. *Salamat pò.*

It is of course expected, and for sure gladly done, that I begin this address with sincere thanks to the President of the University and to its Board of Trustees, and to all those who initiated and moved the process which has brought about the granting of this honorary doctorate this afternoon. And yet a doubt arises. Only two weeks ago I read in one of our dailies that Prince Edward, the younger of the late Princess Diana's sons, is quoted as saying that "In Britain, if a person has no brains he either has a title, or is given one." I will presume the prince's remark does not apply here, for we are not in the United Kingdom. We are in the Philippines, you see, under the enlightened regime of President Erap Estrada.

Levity aside, it is a great honor to receive this prestigious degree from the school which has been my *alma mater* since 1935 when I entered grade five at the Ateneo in Padre Faura 63 years ago.<sup>1</sup>

Thank you then, Fr. Nebres and Trustees, Administrators and Faculty, and Students, for the precious gift you have given me today. *Salamat pò.*

Let me confess at the start that it was extraordinarily difficult for me to know what to say here this afternoon. There are several different audiences in this auditorium today, but I was

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<sup>1</sup>The Ateneo was my father's alma mater also, and he was president of its alumni association the year of his death. It was my brother's, and my maternal grandfather's, and that of his two sons. Almost all of my nephews spent many years on this campus, and now two of my grandnephews are studying in the grade school.

reminded that it is the university community which is the 'convocation' to be addressed, without of course forgetting that half of those present - maybe even more than half - are guests. It was suggested that I was expected to say something about theology, about what might be called "Filipino theology". What were and are its concerns, what its reality, these last forty years that theological work has been my assigned occupation? And maybe: Whither is it now bound? If this address will be a little on the long side, I believe it will speak to what all our awardees, and many others among you, give large significance to, in your lives.

I. Perhaps we can begin this way: by common agreement, I think, more than any other single event in the past century of the history of Christianity, the Second Vatican Council was the most meaningful, even the most earth-shaking of all. Three of the greatest Catholic theologians of the century, asked to assess the Council some 25 years after its ending, gave remarkably converging interpretations of what its "bottom-line" significance was, for the Church of our time.

The German Jesuit Karl Rahner said, that it marked the actual (if only inchoate) coming-to-be of a truly world Church: no longer a Church exported from Europe to other peoples, but a Church in truth becoming a Church within each people, truly of each people.

The French Dominican ecclesiologist Yves Congar saw the Council signaling the emergence of the local churches as subjects of their own histories, within the *catholica unitas*; the arrival [so he called it] of the "time of the heirs".

The Canadian Bernard Lonergan judged it, perhaps most incisively, as the Church's recognition or acknowledgment of history, a coming-to-terms with a Church within history, a Church with history at work within itself.

Others would say in a similar vein: the realization that world and history do not revolve around the Church, but that the Church circles around world and history instead. (M. D. Chenu, O.P.) The world and history do not "define" the Church, but yet the Church "realizes" itself in the world, constitutes itself within history.

The Belgian theologian Edward Schillebeeckx would put the same insight, in more deliberately provocative terms. Not, he says, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the Church there is no salvation), but *extra mundum nulla salus* (outside the world, outside history, no salvation takes place). Christ did not come to take us out of history and save us out of this world. He came to redeem history itself to save the world itself. (John 3,16: "It was not to judge the world that God sent his Son into the world, but that through him the world may be saved.")

The martyred Archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Arnulfo Romero said, — more pastorally (if you will) — in one of his homilies, "The mission of the Church in a given time and place is to strive to transform the history of a people into salvation history."

Finally, let me put all this into something of a definition, borrowed from Joseph Komonchak of the Catholic University of America:

Theology is at the service of Christ's redemptive presence and role in the world. It arises from within a community convinced that Jesus Christ is the Saviour of the world, and the event and message on which it reflects is meant to have an effect upon the course of human history. Theology is thus one of many ways in which the Church seeks to be the sign and instrument by which Christ continues to be historically effective. This

is a point which perhaps especially needs stressing today.<sup>2</sup>

Thus far, something of a definition. Now, a mandatory parenthesis. Before we move on, there is one absolutely necessary clarification to be made. Also in accordance with the "total ecclesiology" of Vatican II, what we mean by Church here is all of us who are baptized, laity as much as clergy, all 'who profess to be members of the Christian community, and followers of Jesus; all who make up what St. Paul calls the Body of Christ in the world. This is fundamental for what we are saying here.

Tying things together, then. For the theologian today, involvement in the Church's responsibility in, and for, ongoing history, are mandatory, not optional. Involvement in the Church's life, its engagement in changing society, its transformative praxis, — all have become part of "doing theology". And if, as has been many times said, more has changed in our part of the globe and its history, — more has changed in the last fifty years than in the preceding five hundred, — then theology and the theologian have to come to terms with these large evolutions and their meanings, with what we have come to name "signs of the times." This kind of theology is a theology of "*acompañar*," of "being with," of "walking with". This kind of theology has to interface Gospel and Church with a world in transition, in process, and help point it to its destina-

<sup>2</sup> Joseph A. Komonchak, "Theologians in the Church," in *Church and Theology, Essays In memory of Carl J. Peter*, edited by Peter C. Phan (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995) 83-87, at 77. *Gaudium et Spes* was an acknowledgement that the Church exists within history, within society, within common human existence, not only in the sense that the Church constitutes itself [realizes itself] as a 'symbolization' of history, of society and of existence." (Giuseppe Ruggieri) "... the world does not circle around the Church, mother and teacher. It is the Church that goes out of itself to find its own identity; she is 'missionary', not by an 'added expansion' outwards, but by an integral letting-go of her 'christendom' situation." (M.D. Chenu, O.P.)

tion and its destiny, a theology that strives to transform a people's journey into a pilgrimage towards what Jesus called the Kingdom of God.

II. To turn now to "Filipino theology," then, of the last forty years. Its endeavor has been to ensure that the Church in our country bears a word, bears the Gospel of Christ, precisely as it encounters *what-is-going-forward* in our common journey as a people, *going forward* towards building a nation (In the words of Pope John XXIII's *Pacem in terris*) "grounded on truth, guided by justice, motivated by love, realized in freedom, and flowering in peace." It has to be a theology in continual discernment, under the leading of the Spirit. It is a theology whose agent, whose real subject, is "the whole Church."

To go into some detail, without trying to be exhaustive: I believe "Filipino theology" has made its journey with gradually increasing self-awareness since — to give a convenient date as peg — Pope Paul VI's *Populorum progressio*, his great 1967 encyclical on the progress of peoples, and that these were some of the milestones along the way:

- the concern for the human and faith meanings of social and economic development, from the sixties onward;
- the emergence of basic Christian communities, later "Basic Ecclesial Communities" or BEC's, the Church coming-to-be at the grassroots;
- the growing struggle for social justice and human rights, and *de facto*, even before that label was imported, the "option for the poor";
- our own home-grown reflection on liberation, born and bred no doubt in syntony with Marxist-Maoist ideological influences in the 70's, helped much by interfusion with Latin American libera-

tion theology, but shaped in substance by local events, especially by the growing resistance to the Marcos martial law and its oppressions; — this resistance to the "ruinous dictatorship" in time gathered its disparate forces to a head, and moved — we believe, *not without the guiding and saving hand of the Lord*, — toward those four fateful days which made EDSA and "the People Power" uprising a "miracle," a gift bestowed, a task begun. Perhaps — we might add, in sorrow — later betrayed by *our own* lack of unity, of courage and political will.

—After EDSA, within the space created by our uneasily restored democracy, the *wrong-sulong* moves to give some consistent embodiment to the historic presence and responsibility of the Church in our society.

— The work of interreligious dialogue, so necessary for the Church in Asia, has been something of a latecomer in the consciousness of many in our country, but henceforth it has to move to front and center, in the decades to come.

The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP-II, 1991) was a summative moment, a remarkable effort at definition of the Church's mission, explicitly formulated and articulated, as official in character as we could want it. *It proposed a vision*, rooted in the Gospel, discerned in and through the long historic process of "evangelization." PCP-II set out upon a renewal of the Church, a renewal itself in service to this vision, 'with clergy and laity-meant to work together at the daunting task it named as the "building of the Church of the poor."

III. This "Filipino theology" could not have been the work of theologians in any real isolation from the crises and currents

around us. It had to find expression in the midst of the movements and inter-crossings of the most diverse sectors of a Church at the heart of 'history itself in the making'. A theology of bits-and-pieces gathered and scotch-taped together in hours of doing and suffering, in dialogue and confrontation, in reflection and prayer, in emptiness, in confusion and paralysis, — in all the times and seasons of *Qoheleth*, it would seem! — in struggle, sometimes in anguish and despair, sometimes with the shedding of real blood and tears. This "Filipino theology" has been the creation of an entire Church, and all these things — and more — were part of its story.

That is why I believe it can be argued that our bishops' pastoral letters, coming to a focused term in the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines, — documents which are a far cry from the magnificent *summae* of the middle ages, texts which only poorly resemble the much-labored-over constitutions of Vatican II — *these documents are yet the substantive Filipino theological texts of our generation.*

May I submit that they can bear the weight of the name "theology." They are pastoral and missionary reflections and directives, true, yet roughly articulating a developed practical ecclesiology in the line of what has been called "an ecclesiology of transformative praxis in history." May I submit that they represent, despite obvious deficiencies, the FAITH and HOPE of the Filipino Catholic community seeking to understand itself and its mission today. And expressing its LOVE, in the Spirit, — a love seeking to name its imperatives and number its deeds. Is this not itself authentic theological endeavor? Even a prophetic theological word? You might even call it, the theology of our patristic age. For it is a true theological search to understand and live out the Gospel of Jesus and make it effectively redemptive in our history.

And thus is it not expected that the Filipino theologian of

the present will continue to work this vein in years to come, laboring "from below," in the urgent service of the Church's mission in our time and place? But all the while, for this is the deeper consequence, constructing a local Church on mission in response to the *kairos* that is upon us? And not incidentally, this is the most concrete meaning of *inculturation* and its theology. For inculturation is at base the task of a local church in the process of its self-realization in history.<sup>3</sup>

Litmus-paper test: Name all the Filipino theologians who are present on the scene today and, to your mind, making something of a difference, and you will see that (I believe without exception) this is where they are, and what they are doing. For this is what the Church in the Philippines today asks of them.

Other theological tasks, of course, accompany this work; we might call them maintenance tasks: some of them foundational and essential (grounding for worship, preaching, catechesis, pastoral practice), needful and useful concerns, which at all times and in all places must go on in the Church. We do not set them aside; none is to be omitted or belittled. Let them go forward, for what is and will be needed, now and in time to come.

So much for the Filipino theology of the recent past and the present.

IV. And what may be said of the future? An educated guess only is what may be offered. In the journey of post-Vatican II theology, 20<sup>th</sup> century ecclesiology has led, by inner *nisus*, to

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Theses on the Local Church. A Theological Reflection in the Asian Context. Theological Advisory Commission of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (TAC/FABC). Published as #60 of the FABC Papers, FABC Secretary General's Office, 18 Caine Road, Hong Kong, January 1991.*

christological search. Already Pope Paul VI foresaw it: the deeper knowledge of the Church would take us to a renewed turning to Jesus. The "Council of the Church" which was Vatican II, was ultimately a re-centering on Christ. John Paul II, beginning his magisterium with *Redemptor hominis*, Christ as redeemer of humanity, has brought us, more explicitly than any Pope before him, to the crucified and risen Lord, and in and through him, to the Trinity and trinitarian labor in our world.

Thus the future search of our theology will center, I believe and I hope, on Jesus the Christ. And, repeating only what many outstanding theologians today are saying, it will be a theology constantly renewed by a personal and an ecclesial *experience* of Christ. The Holy Father said, in the United States in 1993, "Sometimes even we Catholics have lost or maybe never had the chance to experience Christ personally; not Christ as mere 'paradigm' or 'value', but Christ experienced as the living Lord: he who is the Way, the Truth and the Life." Pages can be filled with similar statements from the most influential of contemporary theologians.<sup>4</sup> And most recently and resoundingly, from the Asian bishops in this year's Synod, in personal interventions and in their final message.

In the years ahead, I believe we will see a rediscovery of Jesus Christ in our Asian theology, and even within an acknowledged context of religious pluralism in Asia, we will see emerg-

<sup>4</sup> To name a few: the late Hans Urs von Balthasar, for whom this was a life-long theme; Karl Rahner, Cardinals Carlo Martini, Godfried Danneels and Joseph Ratzinger (all three major theologians in their own right). Even from a seemingly unlikely source, Fr. Avery Dulles, known to many of you, who said not long ago, in a gathering of lay people, that the Church today, and even more the world which "the new evangelization" must speak to, demand a *theology rooted in the authentic experience of Christ in the Spirit*, if it is a theology which will be listened to, if it is a word which will be heard. And I remember two personal conversations with Fr. Bernard Lonergan: to my own surprise, he insisted on the intimate interconnection between prayer and its experience and their role in a theologian's own life.

ing — maybe for the first time, maybe in unexpected depth and splendor, and with wonderment, — the "Asian face of Christ." In a true sense, the history of theology in Asia, in the Philippines, has not yet really begun in earnest. Rightly it will begin, in the deep mind and heart, with an encounter with Jesus Christ.

As I was writing these reflections, I re-read one of the last essays our Father Horacio de la Costa wrote before he went off to Rome to be one of Fr. Pedro Arrupe's General Assistants. It is a paper written with the grace and originality we always expected of him, and bears the title, "The Eastern Face of Christ."<sup>5</sup> Without preaching, he suggests what the Asian Bishops on their own have repeated for years now, almost as refrain: that the "Asian face of Christ" will only emerge when we, with Asian faces, in a Church itself with an Asian face and voice, will incarnate anew to the 97% of Asians who are not of our faith and not of our Church, the One who, being the Way, the Truth and the Life, is "yesterday, today, and the same forever." Now especially that the Asian Synod has sounded the call to inculturation with both insistence and authority, it gains added relevance for us, speaking as it does of Christ and his Gospel in whom all the deepest Asian aspirations will find fulfillment.

If I may cite Fr. de la Costa's concluding paragraph also that I may pay this afternoon a tribute to his memory:

It cannot be without significance that the country which stands almost at the geographical center of the Far East, the Philippines, should also be that in which Christianity has taken the deepest root. There is a Providence that guides the course of human affairs, a Providence whose high

<sup>5</sup> Horacio de la Costa, "The Eastern Face of Christ," in *Asia and the Philippines. Collected Essays by H. de la Costa*. (Manila: Solidaridad Publishing), 1967, 162-169.

purposes we can glimpse even if we cannot completely grasp them.

Surely, it is not presumptuous to see in this providential disposition the destiny to which we are called, weak and unworthy though we are: that of being a spiritual as well as a geographical center, a vital center, in which all Asia may find that which it has long sought but has not yet found: itself, its own mind and heart, not changed but transfigured and made whole in the mind and heart of Christ. Such, I suggest, might be our destiny as a people.<sup>6</sup>

V. One last point and I am done. Pope Paul VI said, many years ago, that the contemporary world, surfeited with words, pays little heed to teachers, who are after all mainly purveyors of words. (Include in this category, practitioners of theology.) If the world listens to teachers, Paul VI said, it is only because they are witnesses first of all. This is also what the Asian bishops said, in their recent Synod.<sup>7</sup> This has become mandatory, they insist, for those of us who do theology as our *métier*, to live as witnesses, if there will be a rightful and honored place for us in the Church of Asia tomorrow.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 169.

<sup>7</sup>Cf. Synod for Asia, "Message to the People of God," in *Origins* (28 May 1998), c.g.#7, citing Pope Paul VI, and Cardinal Julius Darmaatmadja, SJ, "A Church with a truly Asian face," *ibid.* "The effort to be a church with a truly Asian 'face' is explaining its teaching, in its liturgical actions and the like is nothing other than cooperating so that Christ's own efforts will succeed more fully. For Asians, Christ is most suitable made known through human experiences more than through academics. As the *instrumentum laboris* itself states, the most effective and credible proclamation of the risen Lord is the unspoken witness of a person who has undergone a deep God-experience, and whose life is transformed accordingly."

<sup>8</sup>The point that proclamation, dialogue, theology, in Asia, must manifest

Let me bring this rambling discourse to its end here, asking you, dear friends, for myself and others who are trying to be Filipino theologians, that you will pray, so we may learn to be witnesses also, even witnesses first of all, and thus incarnate the word we must proclaim, and so, in the end, be found worthy, with you, to receive the promises of Christ.

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"the inner personal experience of Christ" if the persons addressed will listen and be moved, is so constant a refrain in declarations of Asian bishops, religious conferences, texts preparing for, and given at the Asian Synod, that one could probably compile a book collecting statements like these. For instance, Archbishop Thomas Menampambil, SDB, who was placed in charge of the Secretariat of the Asian Synod, wrote: "I will end... with a brief personal reflection. In the recent past, the presentation of the Christian message inclined to be intellectual, theoretical, doctrinal, historical. Without denying the value of this method in the least, we may observe that the approach to the Asian mind in the field of religion should probably be different: personal, experiential, symbolic, poetic. At present even some Asian Christian thinkers who are most eager to be assertive of their Asianness unconsciously follow another path. They are too argumentative and occasionally contentious. That is not the Asian way. Rather, anyone who shares his or her *lived experience* of his/her faith wins a hearing." (In an address given in Rome, at the SEDOS Seminar of 28 February 1997). An editorial of the *National Catholic Reporter* summarizing the Asian Bishops' reactions to the working paper of the 1998 Asian Synod, gives this as one of the main points made by the Asian Bishops in their responses to Rome. From the Japanese bishops' response to the *lineamenta* (preparatory document), the proposal was made that Asian theology be so developed that it be "based not on a Christ whom we only grasp with our mind, but who speaks to us in our hearts through his living presence and activity." Cf. Thomas C. Fox, "Japan's bishops offer alternative plan for synod," in *National Catholic Reporter*, 21 March 1998, 9.