

## Priests and the Growth of Filipino Materialism



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We have so far discussed Filipino values in relation to Spanish culture. In our present article, we shall discuss the influence of materialism to our lives which is largely inherited by us from the Americans.

We shall concretely define materialism as simply money. We shall treat it as a new Filipino norm which is slowly becoming one of the *exterior principles* in our cultural values hand in hand with *utang-na-loob* and *hiya*.

As a matter of fact, this *money-norm* has even now so influenced the Filipino way of life that today, it can even supplant the *utang-na-loob* and *hiya* norms. More than in any other epoch, it is today that the Filipino has shown much craving for money. Indeed, it has now reached the point that for love of money, many of us have dared the dangers of being called a *walang hiya* or a *walang utang-na-loob*. Even in churches, this is often the people's principal petition.

We shall divide our article into four general headings, namely, the historical background of Filipino materialism, this Filipino materialism in relation to the family-loyalty-circle, in relation to the family and in relation to individuals after which we shall deduce some conclusions and suggest some fields of action which can be open to priests.

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Before we proceed to the discussion of our topic, it is important to first look into the past in order to have an insight into what our ancestors practiced in connection to the subject

matter of our article. We shall subdivide this part into the pre-Spanish regime, the Spanish regime and the modern American time.

**PRE-SPANISH REGIME** — Our pre-Spanish ancestors also had some characteristic practices which point to their tendency towards materialism. Until now, we can still see people following some reminiscences of these practices. For example, mothers of households will never sweep the house nor permit maids to sweep their house at night. It is believed that if this is done the people living in that house will suffer some financial difficulties. For the same reason, we also still find some people who can never be convinced to put out money at night even if it be to pay debts.

There are also those who would always hesitate passing of money whether in bills or in coins through the window even if this be for convenience. This is specially so if the money will be thrown since the money might have *tampo* or the gods of money might get angry for maltreating money thus and so luck might turn away from them.

These practices are significant because they show how much our ancestors care for their possessions and how much respect they give to them and to the god of luck who shower these on them.

Our practice, moreover, of hesitating to ask people to pay their debts to us somehow show the detachment our ancestors have from money. Indeed, even if we need money very badly, the most we can do is to remind our debtors of their debt to us. And in doing this, the time and place must be most properly selected lest the debtor be *mapahiya* (shamed) causing greater trouble.

Thus, we observe that even if our ancestors have that tendency towards materialism, they still manage to control this through their great sense of honor from which *hiya* originates.

**SPANISH REGIME** — With the coming of the Spaniards, Christianity also came into the Filipinos. But with this evangelization of our people, there are some pagan practices still found to function side by side with

Christian rites, which seem to have been tolerated by these first missionaries. We find, for example, the pagan practice of showering coins (*barya*) right after the Christian house blessing rites, which is said to be an invocation for a long reign of prosperity in that house.

We must have also observed how people shower rice (*bigas*) on the newly weds right after the wedding ceremonies.

A more interesting custom is that in which the parties of the bride and the groom try to outdo each other in the giving of cash money to the couple during the banquet after the ceremonies.

In these instances, we see that money and the desire for it only plays a secondary role in Philippine life. We must have also noticed that although Christianity is shown in these practices to have not really been assimilated by the people, the Christian rite is first practiced and the pagan practices only follow. This, however, is not at all surprising because, at this stage, the belief in an almighty, all-wise and all-knowing Providence has somehow already made Filipinos to rely on His decisions which can neither change nor be changed.

Thus our people's concern for the material things of life has somehow been diminished by Spanish Catholicism.

MODERN AMERICAN TIME — When the Spaniards left and the Americans came, however, materialism really began to flourish. Material progress was equal to the name America. And America meant prosperity. So, the Filipinos desired progress, prosperity. As of old, they wanted to be similar to their western counterparts. They would not lack anything which the whites have. Their love for money was, therefore, intensified. They began to have a sustained effort to attain material comforts.

The *herbolario* (herb doctor) now work for a fee, when before he cured for free. Even the hired old women who make novenas (*pidusal*) for the dead, now collect more because of the much lamented floating rate. The *panluluhod* (the custom of going to the houses of relatives specially of godparents on Christmas, New Year and Three Kings) is now associated with

money. The spiritual value of togetherness, of unity which are the very purposes of this tradition has gradually faded.

Even *utang-na-loob*, at this stage, has also slowly been minimized. Everybody now looks for material or cash compensations for favors done.

Regarding the inter-class-strata relationship, we have said earlier that there is really no bitter contest marring the relationship between the rich and the poor because the poor really enjoy a claim to the wealth of their rich patrons. Today, however, the situation is quite different. The poor who compose the ninety per cent of the population naturally increased faster than the rich which consist only ten per cent of the total populace. And with the coming of industrialization and modern equipments, the rich now have the chance to choose among diverse economic opportunities aside from farming which require more manpower supplied by the poor. Indeed, the rich can now go alone with only a few members of the lower stratum of the country's populace which unlike before, are now paid in cash. As a result, unemployment occurs and the originally peaceful patron-client relationship is disturbed.

Labor demonstrations have proven this. The Land Reform Law much advocated by farmers' groups attests to this. And the student rallies championing the cause of the "exploited poor" against oligarchs are witnesses of this.

Truly, this situation has initiated a new age in our country — an age of contest between the rich and the poor. The rapidly widening gap between the rich and the poor plus the unconscious claim of the poor to the riches of the wealthy which had been implanted by the earlier period have awakened the people that they too must possess and enjoy the fruits of the earth.

Indeed, the alienation of the client from his patron has implanted in him that desire for economic stability. He no longer has an *amo* (master) to support the hospitalization of his child, to lend him food when he no longer have anything to feed his children, to facilitate his papers in the various civil and governmental offices and to look for jobs for his sons and daughters. An age of independence, of private initiative has arrived.

## IN RELATION TO THE FAMILY-LOYALTY-CIRCLE

After having said a few observations on the historical background of our topic, we now embark into the examination of the effects this growing tendency of our people has towards materialism. We shall subdivide this part into two sections, namely, Filipino materialism with regard the family-loyalty-circle members and Filipino materialism with regard the economic means of production.

WITH REGARD THE FAMILY-LOYALTY CIRCLE MEMBERS — We have previously said that the family-loyalty-circle is composed of immediate family members and mediate family members, that is, through blood relationship and through contractual relationships.

On the immediate family members, it is observed that the close ties binding each of these family members have always motivated them to lift the family's economic status. This tendency to elevate the financial prestige of the family balances Filipino characteristic traditions in such situations as when an individual tries to defend a member of his family or circle against disrepute out of *utang-na-loob* and *hiya* by trying to bribe a judge or a board examiner to favor his relative. In such cases, indeed, judges, board examiners or other officials usually to succumb to offers of large sums of money for the sake of his own family.

On the mediate family members, we can say that now qualifications for adoption is generally the amount of money a candidate is presumed to have. Financial security counts as the best criterion for the selection of *padrinos*. Often, somebody who is *malakas*, one who has connections, is chosen. This is done to insure the security of the godchildren (*inaanak*) so that when the children already need jobs or any kind of help, he can always be available to act as the third party to approach an employer, or he himself can accept the child in his office if he has vacancies there.

Usually, the *padrino* efficiently does his duties because otherwise he will be dubbed as *mahina* which means that he has failed as a *padrino* and as a mediate member of the family-loyalty-circle which can result in *hiya* towards the other members of that circle.

WITH REGARD THE CIRCLE AND THE ECONOMIC MEANS OF PRODUCTION — In discussing about this topic, it is convenient for the sake of clarity to divide it into two divisions, namely, the *malakas-mahina* system in relation to non-capitalist enterprises and the *malakas-mahina* system in relation to capitalist enterprises.

Speaking of non-capitalist enterprises, we can point out that there are two subdivisions that fall under this classification: those enterprises in which neither the *malakas* nor the company in which he works will lose anything if he accepts inefficient workers into the enterprise, and those in which the *malakas* does not lose any amount but the enterprise does if the same acceptance of inefficient workers is done.

Regarding the first division, that is, regarding those enterprises in which neither the *malakas* nor the company in which he works will lose a single centavo if he gives preference to his inefficient clients, we can say that this, on the other hand, will do a lot of evil to the public. This anomalous practice is usually found in government offices and in foundations.

For example, I have met a case in which because of discriminations in the facilitation of papers, a poor man's son was not accepted into the U.S. Navy. This happened because of unsubmitted documents which could have easily been taken from the city hall had the man asked a *malakas* to do things for him. For a poor man nowadays, to have a US Navy son is already a lot of money but all these were lost just because of this system.

It is, therefore, lamentable that just for the sake of preserving connections, usually for the sake of financial security, the public suffers.

Regarding the second division in which one who is *malakas* will not lose anything even if he accepts or makes unqualified workers or a great number of useless workers accepted, we can say that it is obvious that the *malakas* can use this opportunity to increase his wealth or that of his family or that of his circle. It is this motivation which is usually the cause

of the much publicized graft and corruption eating out democracy in our country. Officials think primarily of how to amass wealth for themselves and for their children.

This practice is unfortunately safeguarded first, by the *malakas-mahina* system itself and second, by the nature of our *hiya* system which we have explained in our previous article. By the *malakas-mahina* system—because the *malakas* who usually commits these crimes always see to it that military men and judges have their shares of the loot. And by the nature of our *hiya* system—because if the crime is not made public by the courts, there is no *hiya* aroused to censure actions.

Besides, it is advanced that our *utang-na-loob* norm cannot condemn such persons because, for instance in the case of government officials, they really think they have no *utang-na-loob* to the people to whom they should owe honesty and responsibility since these people are themselves bought to vote for their candidacy as judged from the amount which candidates spend during elections which, "through justice", they must recover.

Now, speaking of the *malakas-mahina* system and capitalist enterprises in which the *malakas* has the capital in the company and he loses if the company loses, we can say that this case, the *malakas-mahina* system is precisely one of the greatest reasons why Filipinos take very little risks in business enterprises. They usually have the dilemma of losing either money through inefficient relative-workers or relative through the disruption of their family-loyalty-circle unity which is usually backed up by sayings such as: "Ang hindi lumignon sa pinanggalingan ay hindi makararating sa paroroonan" (He who does not look back to where he has been cannot arrive to where he is going).

However, today, money with efficient non-relative-workers is more and more gaining ground against loss of money with an inefficient relative-workers. Connections, therefore, are now slowly fading away as criteria for receiving jobseekers. Merits are now required to fill vacancies specially in these private enterprises.

### IN RELATION TO THE FAMILY

Filipino families are, as a general rule, very well united. Children are linked to each other by their parents. They are so close that even if they are given a greater opportunity in a far place, they will still prefer their humble village where they can live together.

However, nowadays, we often hear of families disunited after the death of parents because of quarrels on material inheritance. Indeed, it is sad to see brothers and sisters go even to courts to settle differences regarding money matters. Usually, they are also the very ones who try to outdo each other on how much wealth they have accumulated once they already have their own families.

For a clearer discussion of our topic, we shall divide it into the different categories of the members of the family, namely, the father, the mother and the children.

**ON THE FATHER OF THE FAMILY** — As is usually the case, the father is the bread-winner of the family. However, it is interesting to note that in our country there is a marked difference between a father from the lower bracket of our society and a father from higher bracket. The poor, who is usually found in the provinces, often learn their trade early. From boyhood, he is already a master of carabaos. He can already call each one of these beasts of burden their proper names. In adolescence, he is already able to handle the flow. And once he already thinks he can master his craft and thus earn a little amount of money, even still very young, he marries to shoulder the responsibilities of a family head.

On the other hand, a man of the rich level, waits to finish his studies, and first looks for stable job before marrying.

Both, moreover, operate to maintain alliances with other people or families. They are often experts in the art of *paki-kisama* because they know that this will be their insurance in times of need.



**ON THE MOTHER OF THE FAMILY** — Mothers are the managers of the house. She keeps the earnings of the father, budget them and secures the rest in forms of debts if she runs short of the needed amount to be spent. She is usually the most troubled when children lack food.

When visitors come, she waits to them and entertains them. She is usually most trained in expressing the Filipino trait of hospitality.

The plight, however, of women today is that more and more men look at the financial stability of the woman they want to be the mother of their children. Cases in which grooms first look at the bank accounts or the documents of the possessions of the bride in the offices of the provincial capitol are no longer exceptions.

**ON THE CHILDREN OF THE FAMILY** — Families have recognized the importance of the education of children. Mostly, they regard the education of the children as the most efficacious means of climbing the social ladder. This is often the reason why parents save for the education of their children.

Cases, however, occur where clashes between parents of the older generation and their children are observed. The authority figure of the parents which they want to preserve will not tolerate the technical knowledge of the children to interfere in family decisions. Children are not easily accepted into the adult world of parents. This is specially true in the financial running of the household or of the family business.

Little by little, however, with the younger set of parents, there is more understanding between them. And it is pointed out that one of the most evident signs of this is the success of the demonstrations and rallies of the youth asking for reforms in the establishment. Sociologists observe that the young succeed in these demonstrations and rallies because these young parents are themselves sympathizers of their children's cause. They don't join them because of their status as family men which confines them only to the task of taking charge of their responsibilities to their family.

Slowly, therefore, the young is having a voice in the adult world specially in economic matters, not only that of the family but also that of the country, as is evident from the much debated Land Reform Law.

### IN RELATION TO INDIVIDUALS

After having dealt on Filipino materialism in relation to the family, we now proceed to deal on Filipino materialism in relation to individuals. We shall divide this part into two, namely, Filipino materialism as regards the Filipino social hierarchy and Filipino materialism as regards to ecclesiastical hierarchy.

**AS REGARDS THE SOCIAL HIERARCHY** — We shall subdivide this section into the poor and the rich. Regarding the poor, we can say that in spite of their social condition, they still retain their pride. This is usually expressed by their desire to have rich associates. They want to attend parties of their rich counterparts, or even just to see their beautiful houses. They want to see persons of exalted offices. They want to go to places frequented by the rich as the Forbes Park or the Cultural Center of the Philippines or even just Baguio because they think it is often related to the rich since it is there where they spend their honeymoons or vacations. They desire these because they want to boast to their fellow poor that they have gone to such a place or that they have met such and such a person.

They make idols of people who have risen from poverty to riches. They crowd or even riot to see such personalities as Nora Aunor. They invite rich people, who had been poor before, in their programs. And they love to hear how they encountered difficulties.

Often, they try to gain the favor of the rich or of a superior to gain security for, indeed, contest is here had because not all the poor can have rich associates and have them as their patrons due to population disproportions which we have already mentioned above.

Regarding those of higher social status, we can say that they are of two kinds, namely the old rich and the new rich.

Both are the objects of the *po* and the *opo* of the poor. The difference, however, is that the old rich, those who have been rich long before, are usually very *kuripot* (stingy). Wanting to preserve their riches, they have the tendency to assume the appearance of misers. They are often aloof to the poor.

The new rich on the other hand, those who have recently acquired a great proportion of the country's wealth, often, through business successes, are usually closer to the poor. They generously give contributions to both religious and civic projects. And since they are more familiar to the poor, they are often approached to be *padrinos*. In these respects, they assume the place of the old rich who have now become alienated from the poor as their patrons. This is explained as arising from their desire to have people recognize that they have already crossed the poor to rich border. As a result, more than the old rich, if proper protocols are not accorded them, they easily show their dissatisfaction unless, of course, they have decided to enter politics in which field they often become most popular.

AS REGARDS THE ECCLESIAL HIERARCHY — Our ecclesial hierarchy is divided into the laity and the clergy. As regards the laity, it is observed that there is a growing consensus to see evangelical poverty in the Church, to see detachment from the things of the world, from materialism, as She always preached through the centuries.

Pope Paul VI himself took note of this when he said in a public audience of July 24, 1970: "We note with watchful attention that, in this period of ours, which is absorbed in gaining, possessing, enjoying economic goods, a desire is apparent in public opinion both inside and outside the Church, to see evangelical poverty practiced. It is almost a need. People want to see it most where the gospel is preached and represented; and we may add, in the official Church, in our Apostolic See itself. We are aware that this is required, internally and externally, for our ministry; and by the grace of God many things have already been done in regard to getting rid of temporal things and reforming ecclesial style. We will continue along these lines, with the respect that is due to legitimate situations and facts, but also trusting that we are understood and assisted by the faithful in our effort to eliminate situa-

tions which are not in accord with the spirit and well-being of the authentic Church. The need for economic and material means, with the consequences they involve — to look for them, beg for them, administer them — must never go beyond the concept of the ends which they are meant to serve; it must recognize the restraints called for by the limits of these ends, the generosity demanded by commitment to them, their spiritual significance." (L'Osservatore Romano, July 30, 1970).

Certainly, here in our country, there is much cause for our laymen to also demand ecclesial poverty from our churchmen. From the beginning, the clerical state has always been identified with the higher level of our society, with the *burgis* as our young men today call them. Indeed, from the time they landed on our shores, they have already been associated with the *señores* and *señoras*, with the *señoritos* and *señoritas*. Because of this, it is appalling to say that our people had always looked to a family of a new cleric as one which have big chances to become rich. It also causes pain to hear some priests helplessly explaining stipends by comparing them with the payment people give to doctors when people call them to heal their diseases.

This professional approach to the priestly vocation, I am afraid, can also account for some priests to gain wealth as priests since they have also paid for their board and lodging to become one for twelve years.

The results of these mentality, which must be totally erased even in seminary days, are gravely disastrous. Indeed, it is sad to see parish priests quarrelling with their assistants; priests selling properties of the local Church when the parishioners already give them enough; priests selling cemetery grounds to rich people to build beautiful graves when in them there are already poor men's dead bodies. It is very sad to know of priests fighting over a rich parish or over titles of lands.

#### SUGGESTED FIELDS OF ACTION

It is no wonder then that our laity asks our clergymen to show expressions of detachment from the cares of this world specially from that of money. Indeed, they are expected to first give example, before they can persuade their people to heed their sermons. For as it is said: nobody can give what he does not have.

To this effect, we suggest that priests have a clear understanding of canon law so that they can follow it more thoroughly and more faithfully. The law, for example which deals on the examination of priests for the different posts in the diocese can help avoid conflicts (canon 130). The law on excessive feasts can prevent suspicions on the part of the faithful (canon 140).

And when priests shall have already detached themselves from materialism, then and only then can they more efficiently do some positive actions to teach this same virtue to the faithful, which, in my opinion, is the best remedy for the increasing lukewarmness of people towards religion.

Our close family ties need only the proper prodding in order to transcend material gains. Our age-old tradition of *pantuluhod* can easily be divested of its peso-trappings through few words of explanations on the nature of *padrinos* before or after baptisms or weddings. This and our *malakas-mahina* system can actually lead to the unity of parishes. And this unity can make the people easily understand the true brotherhood of men as taught by our Holy Mother, the Church so that it can arouse in them a genuine social consciousness which can bid them to be honest in all their dealings even on non-capitalist enterprises and avoid graft and corruption.

Indeed, if priests can only make sacrifices by really practicing evangelical poverty, which the very nature of their vocation dictates, then there will be no more shouts of "Open your books of accounts!" or "Down with clerico-facism!".

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