

# PRIESTS AND FILIPINO RELIGIOUS VALUES



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We have dealt on Filipino socio-politico-economic values. We have treated about our *exterior* principles which we have divided into three articles, namely, on our *utang-na-loob* norm, on our *hiya* norm and on our materialism. We have also dealt on our *interior* principles. We have given our suggestions on how these *interior* principles can prevail over our *exterior* principles. On this subject, we allotted four articles, namely, on priests and Filipino interior principles in general, on our Christian initiation, on Filipinos of the *third* world and, lastly, on the mass media through which we can work towards our goal of integrating the Filipino personality with a more diffused and a more comprehensive effect.

In the following pages, we shall discuss Filipino religious values. We shall talk about the *babaylan*, the *anito*, the *aswang*, the *nuno sa punso*, the *tianak* and so forth. In short, we shall speak about Filipino beliefs on the sphere of the spirits, of the preternatural, of the supernatural — how Christianity replaced our native religion and how Christianity is and can be preserved in our people.

We shall divide our article into three general divisions, namely, some considerations on Filipino psychology, process of Filipino Christianization and preservation of Filipino Christianity.

## SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON FILIPINO PSYCHOLOGY

It was Fr. Angel de Blas O.P. who said that: "Every man thinks and wishes, experiences emotions, develops movement and carries out the functions both of external and internal sensations, but these phenomena, though substantially identical in all men, assume in individual persons inborn traits and charac-

teristics that distinguish the conscious processes of everybody else. Such individual inborn differences taken as a whole and organized into system of permanent and constant psychological behaviour that the subject invariably refers to the self, constitute what in modern terminology is known as *psychological personality*."

Fr. Jesus Merino, O.P., commenting on this passage said that: "the constitution of that personality . . . is so important in figuring out the psychology of big groups of men . . ." He pointed out that it was also Fr. de Blas himself who said that: "Another defect common to many contemporary psychologists consists in not distinguishing well between what we may call the *native equipment of personality*, that is, its inborn constituent traits, and the characteristics it acquires in its development along the line of the individual, ordinarily known as the *education of personality*. The development of personality presupposes personality substantially constituted, the acquisition of new habits and the adjustment to special situation as well as elimination of inadequate dispositions, all three being but modifications introduced in its fundamental traits and qualities."

From these observations, we can point out that in every group of people, there can be found constant psychological endowments which can characterize the group as a unique aggregate of persons and distinguish it from other institutionally structured congregation of individuals.

Among Filipinos, we observe three of these constants which we think relevant to our paper, namely, the predominance of sentiment, patterned normative propriety and attraction to the colorful. We divide this section of our paper among them.

**PREDOMINANCE OF SENTIMENT** — Filipinos are sentimental people. In them, the will prevails over reason. This is why in spite of all dangers of bankruptcy, a Filipino businessman will always employ his relatives in his business. His actions are controlled by his whims, his likes and dislikes. This is way he can easily transform his mood from an ecstatic state of elation into an extreme feeling of sadness. His dances range from the joyous *tinikling* to his sorrowful burial dances. His songs, from *Sa Kabukiran* to *Kuudiman*. His theatrical performances, from *Sa Pula*, *Sa Puti* to *Florante at Laura*. His festal ceremonies varying according to his felt needs, from the happiness of birth and marriage to the oftenly tearful rites for the sick and the dead.

This is why Fr. Merino can say that: "The objectivity of the standards of value might suffer from this (consideration of affection in the Filipino psychology), . . . yet at times it acquires from this very fact some sort of intuitional approach that deserves some consideration."

Also, it must be noted that it is this elasticity of the Filipino sentiment that enables him to laugh at himself.

**PATTERNED NORMATIVE PROPRIETY** — Our people have conventional norms for every aspect of social life — from the manner of dressing to the traditional rules for eating. Minutest details are observed. Prescribed manners of laughing, of walking and even of talking are strictly followed for dignity and respectability. Indeed, this is so deeply rooted in the Filipino that he has really learned how to live with them with such a natural ease that if he does otherwise, he is wont to feel discomfort and even certain qualms of conscience afterwards. To discard these norms of propriety will be, for a Filipino, to be artificial.

This trait actually accounts for the conservatism of our people. This is what allows them to disregard being called "old-fashioned". The reason behind this can be traced to the age-old answer: "That is what our ancestors told us;" or "We have to go on lest we draw all misfortunes upon us; lest we be sick and die."

**ATTRACTION TO THE COLORFUL** — Aside from the two foregoing characteristics, we can also add the fact that Filipinos are naturally attracted to the colorful. The Filipino sense of avoiding the abstract and thinking in terms of the concrete makes him tend to love "spendour, pomp, color and mystery". Thus, we see the exquisite paintings of his jeepneys delicately done without neglecting the smallest detail. His fiestas are not complete without colorful arches and banners. His altars are decorated with the most imaginative curvings even "bordering the sensuous." His religious services are equally adorned with symbolic actions. His religious needs are only satisfied by "meaningful representations, images, songs ceremonies, religious insignia, popular religious festivities, highly impressive elements, grand structures as temples" and similar other colorful celebrations like processions, *cenaculo* (passion play) and the flagellantes.

## PROCESS OF FILIPINO CHRISTIANIZATION

After having briefly discussed and placed the above Filipino characteristics in their proper perspective, let us now consider how, in history, these traits were used by the first missionaries to convert our ancestors.

We divide this section of our paper into three, namely, substitution, exaggeration and compartmentalization.

*SUBSTITUTION* — Working through the existing beliefs of the people, sociologists believe that the Spanish missionaries, through clarifications, were able to substitute certain concepts of pagan religion with those of Christianity. The Christian concept of the Spanish *Dios* (in Tagalog *Di-yos*) substituted the pagan *Bathala*. The Christian priest took the place of their *babaylan*. The pagan lesser duties were dethroned by the Christian saints.

This saint-concept had a greater appeal to the Filipino natives. First — because the saints are less abstract than the idea of God. Second — the intercessory powers of the saints arouse in the Filipino their *malakas-mahina* principle. And third — because this saint-concept fortifies and strengthens their family-loyalty-relationships.

Thus, we see that novenas, processions, pilgrimages and other devotions to the saints are very popular among our people. Specialized intercessory powers of saints gain a great number of devotees to them. St. Isidore is invoked by farmers; St. Raphael, by fishermen; St. Jude, by those in despair. Enthronement of the Sacred Heart, taking the place of the household gods, also gained popularity since it enhances family solidarity. Rosaries, scapulars and medals are also said to have taken the place of the *anting-anting* (charms).

These substitutes are easily accepted by the natives since they are "understood" by them. They served as linkages between Christianity and paganism.

Even in liturgical prayers, substitutions had been possible. Fr. Francis Lambrecht records a number of pagan prayers and their substitutes. Here is a Mayaoyao prayer before birth: "Thou, chicken, we sacrifice thee to the Boley deities of the Skyworld and the Underworld, that this pregnant woman may live, that she may continue working in the fields here around, that may live both this household, and their pigs and their

chickens and their children." The Christian substitute runs this way: "Lord God, Creator of all things, Thou who didst prepare the body and soul of the Blessed Virgin Mary, that she was worthy to be made the abode of Thy Son, accept the fervent prayer of this Thy servant, humbly beseeching Thee to preserve the child which Thou hast given her to conceive, and to protect it against all harm, so that it may favorably come to the light, may serve Thee always in all things and thus obtain life everlasting. Amen."

Other examples of substitutes to pagan prayers are the following. Here, for instance, is a blessing for seedlings: "We beseech and implore Thee, O Lord, that Thou deign to bless these seedlings; may gentle breezes blow upon them, may the dew of heaven make them bring forth shoots and give them growth, so that they may without hindrance reach full maturity in due time, in behalf of the spiritual and bodily welfare of Thy faithful. Through Christ Our Lord. Amen."

Also, here is a blessing after the harvest: "Almighty God, who dost not fail to award abundance of fruit through the dew of heaven and by making the earth productive, we thank Thee for Thy fatherly care which enables us to reap these crops; relying on Thy merciful bounty, we beseech Thee to bless these fruits, to preserve them and ward off all that may be harmful to them; and grant also that those, whose prospects Thou didst anticipate with Thy benefits, may glorify Thee for Thy watchful protection, may always praise Thee for Thy mercy and may enjoy these temporal benefits without neglecting those that are eternal. Through Christ Our Lord. Amen."

In these examples, we can see the distinctive nobility of Christian prayer which the natives found irresistible. Compare with them, for example, the following Mayaoyao prayer: "I sway to you this rice, that, when shall rise the sun of Pangangapang Mountain, may multiply your stalks; may the rain from Mabayokan Mountain fall on you, may your stalks be luxuriant, may you produce grains, may your worms, all of them, be shaken off, may the rats, all of them, be chased and moved to the rice fields of our enemies of Kadaklan, our enemies of Balangaw."

It is indeed obvious that through our Christians substitute, pagans can be converted.

Add to this solemn dignity the color of our Catholic liturgy, the richness of our sacramental and sacrificial ceremonies.

our "devotional bounty", the beauty of our sacerdotal vestments and we can easily understand how the first missionaries were able to incite awe, belief, and that sense of mystery in our ancestors.

**EXAGGERATION** — Although, however, we find the use of such splendour and color significantly helpful to the spread of Catholicism in our country, in the last analysis, we observe that an exaggerated use of these, as we have pointed out earlier, in our first article, is divisive. This gave rise to what we have termed as the Filipino sense of aristocracy which separates the elite (the *burgis*) from the poor (the common *tao*).

Moreover, it is also true that prestige was enhanced by these awe-inspiring "new religion" which in a way, made the Christianization of our country easier for the missionaries.

However, we can point out that exaggerations also did occur. Their evil consequences can be observed even in our religious practices today. Too much emphasis, for example, on mortification still gives us those flagellantes during the Holy Week. We still hear people believe, or at least threaten, the younger generations of getting stuck on a tree if they climb it on a Good Friday. Also, there are still those who forbid taking showers on this "anniversary of the death of Our Lord" because "the water then is dead". These are ridiculous. And all because of an exaggerated emphasis on fasting and modesty!

An observation of the Filipino concept of charity will also reveal a certain degree of exaggeration. Consider, for example, our town *fiestas*. Everybody is served — invited or not invited, known or not known. The hosts never really think of what they will eat the next day. And if the visitor happens to praise a precious item in the house, the hosts give it to them at once. *Ang ganda ano?* (It's beautiful, isn't it?) *Sige, sa iyo na!* (Alright, you may take it.)

Through these examples, we see that the exaggerations our people had in religion have their repercussions in their socio-economic life.

**COMPARTMENTALIZATION** — And these exaggerations assume more serious social consequences if we extend our view on the matter a little farther. We spoke, for example, of the rise of aristocracy in our society. And this, we said, is divisive since it prepares

the ground for certain standards of normative propriety which separates those who can afford to follow them and those who simply cannot. Let us take, for instance, those western norms for eating. It is respectable, dignified and "class" to follow them — how to sit down; how to open your mouth; how to use the spoons, the big one and the small one; how to use the fork and the knife; how and when and to whom to speak with. But, sad to say, it is only the rich who can afford to have training in these matters. The poor cannot. As a consequence, a poor man will naturally feel out of place in a banquet where he has to eat with the rich. This fact also accounts for the gap and hence lack of dialogue between the authority, who is supposed to follow these norms, and the subject. And thus, arise the need for compartmentalization in our social relationships. In one place, we act according to a set pattern and in another differently.

Situations, like this, in most cases, generate in our people a *hands off policy* (*walang pakialaman*) which can even be paved by our innate *amor propio*. Thus, we have an exclusive family-loyalty-relationship-circle, which is even strengthened by our *barangay* background.

In the religious sphere, this compartmentalization is also what we observe. Christians who do their duties as Christians also find themselves believing in the pagan deities deposed by the Christian God and saints. In passing before a mound of earth (the white ants' hill) which is supposed to be the dwelling place of the *nuno sa punso* (a local character of the spirit world about two feet and with serene white old man's beard), many still apologetically recite this formula: "Lolo, ako'y gumagalang sa inyong kaharian huwag po sanang magagalit kung ako'y magdaan." Or, the following is said: "Magandang araw sa inyo, Tanda/Kung kayo'y masaling di po sinasadya." In fear of the *mangkukulam* (witch) and of the *aswang* (local vampire), a great number cannot remain alone at night specially if the moon is full. When one is lost in the fields or in the forests, many still believe that to find one's way, he has to invert his clothes to fool the *tianak* (a local demon usually imagined as taking the form of a child) who has been misleading him.

This is a kind of cultural fusion which must be corrected in the set of our basic cultural values, a kind of compartmentalized attitude in which oppositions and even contradictions are held at the same time. We ask help from the saints and at

the same time we offer propitiations to the *kapre* (a giant of the spirit world characterized by the smoking of cigar). We ask prayers from a priests for a sick person and at the same time we call a *herbolario* to cure the sickness of that person. We pray the rosary in a dark street and at the same time we instruct children not to point at anything (*baka mamatanda*). We are married in Church and at the same time we look for bad omens like earthquake, burnt house, breakage of glasses, dishes or spilling of soup.

Indeed, it does appear that beneath the sophistication of our splendid Catholic ceremonies, the pagan still lives in the unconscious of our people. We believe that this is a kind of cultural resistance to change on the part of our pagan ancestors which Christianity, through the years, has not been able to overcome.

## PRESERVATION OF FILIPINO CHRISTIANITY

Considering these situations, therefore, we see the great problem confronting our people which priests of today must be able to solve or help solve. Again, here are conflicts between our *interior* principles and *exterior* principles.

In this section of our paper, we shall try to offer suggestions for solution. We shall divide this section into two, namely, within the family and within the parish.

*WITHIN THE FAMILY* — Religion, among Filipinos, is a family affair. The moment a new house is built, a priest is called to bless it. Enthronment of Christ the king follows. Marriage, which is often controlled by parents, is never considered as such if not done in the presence of the priest. New properties are also asked to be blessed like automobiles, tractors and so forth. An expectant mother also asks for a priest's blessing. And a mother who has newly given birth together with her new born son are also expected to receive the same blessing from the priest.

In all these situations, moreover, it must be pointed out that it is the Filipina, the mother of the family, who takes all the initiative. The role of the Filipina towards the religious training of the male members of her family can never be overlooked.

Through her, therefore, a priest can greatly influence the formation of a Christian family.



The love the Filipino has for the dead, which can traced back to his pagan cult of ancestors and which is still shown through the celebration of the All Saints' Day, through the offering of masses, candles and flowers *for* and *to* them, can be a help to make him abstract from the Filipino tendency to think in terms of the concrete and the colorful through which the inner mysteries of our faith are neglected.

The Filipino love for his patron saint is another step towards this abstraction. Through this, we can proceed to a true love of God which is often too abstract for a Filipino to comprehend.

**WITHIN THE PARISH** — It is the task of the parish priest to educate his people. To this end, our cultural liturgical practices can be of great help. We believe that, at this stage of our Filipino religious development, these customs properly explained, can be of great educative value.

The *pubasa* during Holy Week, the dramatic *cenaculo*, the *salubong*, the *soledad*, the *flores de Mayo* and the *kubol* on Palm Sundays can be developed to our advantage. The *Santacruzán* of May (it is a pity the feast of the Holy Cross has been transferred) can also be properly oriented instead of just letting some politicians use them to enhance their political ambitions.

It is lamentable that we have begun eliminating these even before they have truly served their purpose and even before they are understood by our people as actually not superstitious. We believe that if there is any period in our history when these practices can be fully used for the benefit of our people, it is *today* when we have already, at least to some extent, forgotten our ancestral superstitions.

## CONCLUSIONS

After what we have discussed, we can say that there is a need for a greater emphasis on the true understanding of our faith. This can be done through our traditional religious practices. This can be done through the lessening of *neo-legalistic* requirements for the external expressions of christian doctrine. Changes, for certainly change we have to, must be done gradually. Substitutes however, must be offered for practices which are decided upon to be eliminated. And these must be

formulated according to the psycho-cultural frame-work of our people, without, moreover, any prejudice to sound doctrine and Christian morality.

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**"Popular devotions** of the Christian people are warmly commended, provided they accord with the laws and norms of the Church. Such is especially the case with devotions called for by the Holy See.

Devotions proper to individual churches also have a special dignity if they are conducted by mandate of the bishops in accord with customs or books lawfully approved."

(Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, no. 13)