AFTER VATICAN II: THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION IN THE CHURCH IN THE PHILIPPINES 1965-1987

Catalino G. Arévalo, S.J.

Before addressing myself to the theme assigned to this paper, may I simply say what an honor I consider it to be invited to participate in this jubilee celebration of the Pontificio Collegio Filippino. It is a silver jubilee well deserving to be marked, for these 25 years have been filled with outstanding service. As His Eminence Cardinal Sin said last Thursday, these 25 years have seen storms and floods raging over our country, and many a bishop present here can tell us of the many difficulties the Collegio on Via Aurelia has met and somehow overcome. Surely the support of the Lord has sustained this enterprise, and the dream which brought it into being, and the little dark Virgin of the Tipolo tree has seen it through its long voyage safely. For which we can only, in the name of our faithful people, render great thanks.

To speak of “theological reflection” in the Philippine Church since Vatican II is especially difficult because one has to survey a phenomenon which has existed largely in spoken and mimeographed form; one has to call on personal experience rather than on libraries. In a way, Cardinal Sin’s keynote address had to do the same thing, and his effort has made my work somewhat lighter. To follow, as he did, the itinerary of the Filipino Catholic community since the ending of Vatican II was to do a “theological history” of...

Author’s Note: The text as here given reproduces the lecture as delivered in the aula magna of the Urbaniana University in Rome on 2 May 1987, slightly edited by Landas editors. The time-constraints of the lecture demanded much condensation, undoubtedly to the sacrifice of clarity and explicitation. It is hoped a fuller (and “spelled out”) version of this paper, with appropriate footnotes, can be published later, in a collection of papers of current theological interest which (please God) may see the light of day in a few months. In the meantime, perhaps this sketch with broad strokes can be of some use to our readers.
sorts, especially if we are to accept the overall thesis that to do "local theology" is to reflect on the way a believing community of a given time and place has responded to the "signs of the times" and to the leading of the Holy Spirit, as the community discerns its way in history.

A Filipino Baptist theologian, Dr. Rodrigo Tano, some five years ago published his doctoral dissertation which studies, such is its title, "theology in a Philippine setting." I am not at all happy about much of his book; there is much serious misunderstanding and maybe even misrepresentation (all of it, I hasten to add, unintended). But of interest to our present concern is his finding that the work of the Filipino theologians he studies "arises from the necessity of confessing the faith in the changing socio-political milieu in which the church is placed. Its methodology, shape, motifs and emphases are determined by the situation in the Philippines. Filipino theology, [he concludes] is distinctively a contextual theology" (op. cit., p. 12).

PRENOTES

Let me begin by setting down four prenotes to our presentation: (a) the limitations of this survey; (b) the end-term of the theological reflection in question has been taken as — in the main — statements of episcopal conferences or works (published and unpublished) of particular theologians (these thus become "sources" in a rather broad sense); (c) what we will have is a "highly approximative survey" only for want of formal studies with sufficient breadth or depth; (d) some unpacking of what we take the term "theological reflection" to mean.

To delay on the first and last prenotes only:

a) Our focus will be Roman Catholic theology only. There is no time to do justice even to this area. It will take up what I believe has been at the center of "contextual theology" in our country, since ca. 1965.

Just last month I was asked by a German encyclopedia on mission to draw up a catalogue of sorts of theological work done in the Philippines in the last few decades. I drew up a tentative listing by roughly-made categories and was amazed at how much published material there actually is, if we are willing to cast our net
broadly and take "theology" in a rather loose sense. I am convinced that someone looking for an historical thesis here will find more than he bargained for. But this afternoon it would profit us little, I believe, to do this sort of exercise.

d) The sense in which we take "theological reflection" here needs perhaps a word of explanation.

We will presuppose the "standard tasks" of theology, grouped loosely around kerygma and didache. We will presuppose "doxology as theology," a justifiable enough category. Similarly, theology as paradosis, the explicit transmission, in every generation, of the Tradition — the Great Tradition, if you will — as an horizon of belief, thought, and life. What this transmission means, in depth, we will not take up now. That would call for an entire paper that could be very exciting. But that is not our argument this afternoon. What the objective pole of that transmission is: the heritage by which succeeding generations of Christians locate themselves in the world, in history and before God. What its subjective pole is, as reception and appropriation, as interpretative process, as interpretative achievement. There is a whole field theory of Tradition and Local Church here which we must presuppose.

By theological reflection I mean rather the effort to interface (to use the current jargon) an understanding of the issues of the present, with the horizon of our belief and our understanding of that belief. A "reflecting in faith" which is at the service of the Church's pastoral mission, much as the bishops and theologians of Vatican II did, in Gaudium et Spes. Karl Rahner's understanding of what a "pastoral constitution" is already wrestled with this kind of activity, as have, more recently, the best works of Latin American liberation theology. Just yesterday, drafting these pages, I ran into some lucid pages on all this in Bruno Forte's Christology.

I. FRAMEWORK FOR REFLECTION

I believe the "theological history" Cardinal Sin gave us in his keynote address is quite important as background for what we have to try to work out in this paper. He summarized 27 years under the headings of "four bus-stops" or "four turnings." Not every "turning" produced its own original or characteristic theological reflection but every "turning" is important, to see where the themes are collocated, what context they were addressing.
This paper, in its more complete form gives four pages to the "four turnings" Cardinal Sin developed: "turning to people" - Church as community, human persons in relationship, clergy-lay people interaction, dialogue, koinonia as ideal.

"Turning to the poor": Our way into the "preferential love for the poor." The wellspring of the most significant and far-reaching stream of Filipino theological reflection, these last 25 years. This turning embodies some of the really decisive movements within the post-Vatican II Church in our country. Together with the first turning, it would include the entire phenomenon of birth and growth of Basic Christian Communities, as in fact (again we refer to Cardinal Sin's talk) an unfinished task.

Fr. Jim Kroeger's Human Promotion and the Church's Mission of Evangelization (Gregorian thesis, 1985) is the best account of this turning as far as Church presence and action goes, in the Development/Liberation scene. We can only refer to it, adding nothing more for now.

"Turning to prayer" is Cardinal Sin's third moment. The mid-seventies, mainly, in the wake (surprisingly or not-surprisingly enough, depending on your point of access to events) of social involvement and growing political activism.

Lastly, "turning to the politics of peace-making." What others have called "the Aquino phenomenon," 1983 et deinceps, up to the present moment, the quest for non-violent change, the creation of people power, President Cory Aquino still at the Malacañang Guest House, despite all the machinations of the deposed dictator in Hawaii, and the several intractable insurgencies at home.

II. THEOLOGICAL "BASES AND INFLUENCES": IN VATICAN II, IN OTHER TEXTS OF THE MAGISTERIUM

With regard to these "four turnings": reflecting on them towards "a theology of the presence and mission of the Church" within a people's historical project and developing history would call for a theological method which has been named (by Fr. Chenu first of all) that "of the signs of the times."

For the itinerary of these "four turnings" is, in fact, a local realization of the decisive paradigm-shift in ecclesiology which has taken place since Vatican II. Of this paradigm-shift much has been written (I have just referred to Bruno Forte's summative presenta-
tion). Let me cite one passage from the great Dominican theologian Yves Congar.

In the first place, there has been a shift from the Church cut-off from the world, a society essentially hierarchical, to the notion of the Church as People of God, made up of the faithful, journeying on the itinerary of mankind. The idea of People of God is not a political concept; it does not mean democracy. Rather the Church is truly a community of believers, united with its pastors, a community which celebrates together, acts and works together, and thus has its own liberty, its gifts and charisms. The Church is, in this sense, "built up from below," — the Church lives from the life of the faithful.

With this has emerged the consciousness that the welfare of mankind is part of the Gospel and of the mission of the Church. Concern for the rights of man is henceforth an integral dimension of the mission of the Church. This realization has brought immense consequences in its train. It has given us, in Latin America, Medellin and Puebla; and has set in motion the fantastic adventure of the churches in that continent. The Council certainly did not foresee these developments when it promulgated the decree on the Church in the World of our Time (Gaudium et Spes), but without doubt the Council did set these developments in motion.

This paradigm-shift forms the premise for the theological reflection that has actually taken place in the Church in the Philippines since Vatican II entered its consciousness and its life.

In second place, the orientations from the plenary assemblies and the various Bishops' Institutes (BISA, BIRA, BIMA, BILA, the Colloquium on Ministries, the International Mission Congress in Manila 1979, etc.) of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences have also played a significant role in the development of theological reflection in the Philippine Catholic context.

Above all, the programmatic FABC I (Taipeh, 1974) declaration on "Evangelization in Asia Today," with its clear and forceful definition of evangelization in Asia setting the local church as center of gravity and historical subject; entering its historical project through the dialogue with its people in their concrete living and changing milieux: dialogue with their cultures, with the Asian religions underlying those cultures, dialogue with their peoples in their overwhelming situations of poverty, often dehumanizing misery, and within their struggles for development and liberation. The Taipei declaration of FABC I, by common admission, drew
up a theological framework for further thought within the local churches in the FABC region.

This reflection would thus make "the theology of the signs of the times" a common place methodology, among us. Kroeger and Tano have both chosen this theological approach as, in a way, normative for "theology in the Philippine setting" in these last two decades. The "method" itself derives from the Magisterium, from John 23rd's Pacem in Terris onward, through Gaudium et Spes, Populorum Progressio. Kroeger devotes a good deal of explicit attention to it, seen precisely in Philippine use.

What we want to indicate here, and underscore, is that in the constructions of Philippine theological reflection (what we would consider its mainstream), the reference to the Magisterium of the Council and the Roman Pontiffs, and to documents from Episcopal Conferences of sister-churches has always been mandatory and integral to the procedure. There has always been an explicit and constant desire to refer to these "source-texts" as some sort of "presence of the Tradition," or "guarantee of catholicity." Kroeger details such reference, one of the merits of his work. Filipino theological reflection has considered this a strength, not a weakness; a source of greater assurance in discernment and decision. The communion of churches, is theologically, far from being an empty phase.

III. THE THEOLOGICAL THEMES

From Cardinal Sin's "four turnings" history, and Kroeger and Tano before him, one might gather that the issue of "relevance or non-relevance" of theological reflection in the Philippine scene has centered largely on the relationship between Faith/Gospel/Local Church on the one hand and the Development/Liberation problematic on the other, as mutually addressing each other in the Philippines of the nineteen-sixties and nineteen-seventies.

This is, however, important to note in this regard: we take the Development/Liberation problematic in a wider meaning than it would seem to have, at first blush. It is taken, rather, as shorthand for a total historical moment, which holds the "becoming of a people" and a nation seen as a project of meaning within history.

We look at our people as they are "growing towards the future" and ask: what questions do they address to the Gospel, from
what they now are, where they are, how they are? Or, conversely, what has the Gospel to say to them, precisely at this hour of their history? Theology here is an endeavour at the service of a local church which in its turn is at the service of a people in the midst of a developing project and an emerging identity. Thus theology is here for good or ill far from being a metier merely carried out in lecture room or from the pages of learned journals. It seeks rather to be a servant of a faithful community journeying on a pilgrimage. If one will allow a certain lyricism of language, someone has said that its habitat is the heat of the day and the dust of the road, the wayside inns of the evening, with the inevitable partialities of half-formed questions and unfinished discussions: a theology in via, of a people also on its way. Echoes of John Paul II’s splendid formula, “Man is the way the Church must go . . .” Thus man is the way theology too must go.

We must add, however, lest there be misunderstanding, that this is in a sense the only way of “doing theology” that is truly possible for most of us. Thus it does not hold in disdain the tools and paraphernalia, the criteria and concepts, the sort of theology the academe demands. It needs the fruit of that kind of effort, which has, in the long run, an indispensability of its own. It must interface with this kind of theology, sooner or later, somewhere along the way. But for us theological work is a response to kairos, and the response has to be much more than that of scholarly discourse.

This theology is a way of servanthood. In obedience to it, an identity — both for local church and its own theological reflection — emerges “from below,” if you will. A vocation in grace is discerned, which clarifies for the believing and hoping community what here and now “being Church” really means in the flesh; which gives the church which has its distinct local habitation, its name, on the white pebble of the Book of Revelation, forged in the heart of “Event.”

Having delivered myself of all that, somewhat pretentiously, perhaps, there remains to line up the major themes which have been, for us, the focus of reflection in the last two decades and more.

1. First, obviously, if what has been so far said is true, the central concern has been the mission of the Church in the Philippines and perhaps in Asia today.
Overall, we have already noted, this has been the comprehensive question, since FABC I articulated it, for all the churches in Asia, prior to the 1974 Synod on Evangelization. Summarily: the local church as subject of an historical project, the Gospel here, for our people and their emerging history. Leonardo Boff would later coin the term “ecclesiogenesis”: without ideological connotations, it is a good term.

The issue of “first evangelization,” posed by Evangelii Nuntiandi in 1975, repeated at the 1979 International Mission Congress in Manila, enters here too, but surely not divorced from the three dialogues, which are the mode of all evangelization, for the Asian context. And thus “first evangelization” becomes a task at once immensely more complex and more demanding.

Incidentally, for me, the Asian reflection has (for practical purposes) equated “inculturation” with local church, with local church precisely as subject of an historical project, of “ecclesiogenesis.”

2. Secondly, theme two: the wrestling with ideologies of development and liberation; the wrestling with the issue of violence and non-violence, in its various discerned responses, concretely taken.

Under this theme we subsume the “preferential love, or option, for the poor.” This topic, which has found its incontestable blessing in Pope John Paul II, in Puebla, and the Congregation of Doctrine’s two texts on liberation, surfaces as prior to, and underlying, the issue of ideologies.

In the Philippines, it is an issue which is urgent, crucial, ongoing, even after the providential fall of the conjugal dictatorship; it remains with us and simply will not go away. Even these days, the secular press gives special prominence to its present political significance.

Some points of reference here have been, and are: the social analysis provided by the empirical sciences and more specifically by marxist thought and its underlying “scientific” (sic) perspectives; the developing body of Catholic social/political teaching precisely as it encounters concrete situations; the day-to-day changing human rights picture in both urban areas and countryside; the “option for violence” and active collaboration with movements which have themselves chosen that option as necessary dimension of strategy and praxis, etc. (The issue is, of course, particularly agonizing when priests and religious have felt con-
strained to follow the same option. This was the burning issue of the decades of the dictatorship, for so many; it remains a present concern.)

3. Basic Christian Communities or Basic Ecclesial Communities have, within the last 20 years, assumed an ever larger importance for the Philippine Church. This is especially true of Mindanao, where they are seen, by almost general consensus, as figure or paradigm of the future shape of the Church there.

Not a small measure of reflection has already been addressed to the BECs and their development. Some Bishops believe that they provide grassroots testing grounds for the interaction of “from above” and “from below” factors. (We might say, in passing, that this interaction is perhaps the essential issue in all Christian theology and theological praxis today.) Many believe that the concrete meaning of baptismal priesthood, of lay ministry, of catechesis and situated theological reflection, of inculturation and authentic spirituality, find in the BECs the privileged matrix for experiment, realization and embodiment.

How does one measure and evaluate their ecclesiality? This is not a theoretical question: witness the MSPC crisis. The CBCP more than once, and FABC III in Bangkok in 1982, a good number of dioceses where BCCs exist, have tried to discern and fix criteria. The guidelines from the Magisterium, Lumen Gentium and Christus Dominus for instance, are at hand. The celebrated six E’s — évangelie, Esprit Saint, eucharistie, évêque, être Eglise (communion and participation), évangéliste (mission) — when approached in their concrete historical incidence are not so easily realized. . . . The questions remain: how is ecclesiality to be actually established, guaranteed, developed, in dynamic correlation (not with ecclesiastical factors only) but with “what is going on” in the struggle for the meanings and values of the Kingdom, in a given time, in a given place, with flesh-and-blood people and even dollars-and-cents issues embodied in real life?

4. The peaceful revolution of February 1986 and the accompanying “Aquino phenomenon” (as it has sometimes been called), its antecedents, its concrete “real-ization,” Ereignis: what is its meaning in the perspective of faith, of “inserting the Gospel” into our vocation and destiny as a people? What does it reveal, in a discernment under the guidance of the Spirit, regarding God’s designs for us?
Is it possible to do “theological reflection” on this? What are the conditions of validity, for such reflection? Articles and books have been written, some quite stimulating.

The President has, herself, often used the Exodus analogy. With the Marian Year as avenue of illumination, for Cardinal Sin and in Ambassador Howard Dee’s book, the text of 2 Chronicles 7:14 has been seen, again and again, as a key to understanding. “God hears the cry of the poor.” Bishop Francisco Claver, for instance, has suggested a thesis with non-violence and the spiritual dimension in “the Aquino phenomenon” as a hermeneutical baseline. There have been, of course, variant interpretations, the well-publicized dissent of Fr. Moraleta against any talk of “divine intervention” with regard to EDSA. But it is surprising how this theme continues to have, for Christians in our country, rich and poor, educated and not, young and old, such interest. Only a few months ago, at a conference of evangelicals, this question of “miracle” was forthrightly posed to me, by a Protestant who was at EDSA and experienced, he said, with many tears, the presence of God there in the hour of our destiny.

5. Linked with many of the above issues, Filipino “popular religiosity” and its meaning for ecclesial life and mission in the Philippines are seen as imperative assignments for theological reflection. Segundo Galilea, from Chile, has made several visits to our country, and sees this as a large and unaddressed-theological concern.

It has been said that, when all is said and done, some 95% of our Filipino Catholics, whether educated or unlettered, express their Catholic faith largely in terms of “popular piety.” Understood, not reductionistically, this statement contains a large freight of truth: the revolution at EDSA is witness of this. In that most crucial hour of our contemporary history, it was the figure of Mary, raised above the sea of people, which more than anything else bespoke the heart of a people and revealed its deepest hope.

The devotion to the Mother of the Lord plays an undeniably significant part in the Christian/religious consciousness of our entire people. Never perhaps has it been more alive in our history than at present — and this, despite concerted and unrelenting attack from fundamentalist sects proliferating in our country today. Anyone who denies this, has simply been blinded by either secularistic or ideological bias from facing facts. “Pueblo amante
de Maria' someone has remarked, is a fact as undeniable as the comfortably round noses on our faces.

In all, then, what does "Filipino popular piety" tell us, as a people of faith, for our life today and our immense task of national reconstruction, and our project for tomorrow? It has also been said, that in popular piety we have the most recognizable efforts of inculturation of faith, carried out by the people themselves. There is much reflection that needs to be done here, even as Latin Americans have begun to reflect on Guadalupe, Tepeyac and its historical and theological significance.

6. There is, finally, the question of a contemporary Filipino spirituality for the carrying out of the mission of the Church in our country at this precise time. The people who have addressed themselves to this concern are especially the women, both religious and lay, maybe because of all of us, they are the most "involved." Maybe too in the Philippines the role religious women, and other women for that matter, play in the Catholic and national life is unparalleled in all the world. Witness President Corazon Aquino (for whom, incidentally, we are told John Paul II prays daily). Incidentally again, or perhaps not so incidentally, we as Filipinos — generally, at least — are quite happy and proud about the place women occupy in our society.

But let us return to the matter of spirituality. The question, "What is the appropriate spirituality for mission which we must develop for Filipino Christians today?", seems to those most actively involved in ecclesial praxis today, from the ground of evangelical commitment, to be the key question which must be addressed first of all. They see this as the (I repeat, the) crucial present imperative. (Parenthetically, is it not significant that Gustavo Gutierrez, father of liberation theology, has turned decisively to spirituality, in his most recent writings?)

A spirituality, if it is to be somewhat "specific" and "contextual," is a matter of choices and a setting of priorities, in some hierarchical order. A spirituality is a heuristic sketch of a pattern of life, a way of responding to a vocation in grace. It need not be fully comprehensive, with all the bases touched on, as a systematic theology pretends to be.

But a spirituality springs first of all from experience and life: experience as suffering, as struggle, as sharing, as solidarity in faith; experience as love in affect and in deed; experience as the
presence of God known even fleetingly, like a melody heard in the quiet night; experience as hope, of a whole people, played out in courage and in risk. It is from these wells that a theology draws its living waters, as from pure and fresh springs. Here again we borrow from Gustavo Gutierrez citing St. Bernard's "we drink from our own wells." First, the spirituality, then the theology which shall catch its insight and work out its articulation, in its presence. Such, at least, is one way of moving into the theological enterprise, and many in the Church in the Philippines think it is the best way of all.

CONCLUSION

These seem to me to touch on the main questions and concerns which have exercised the "more contextualized" theological reflection in the Philippines in the last twenty and more years. It would take us beyond the limits of our time to develop the "at least tentative answers" that have been emerging in their regard. For there has been, and continues to be, reflection on many levels: in pastoral workshops, in BEC and other study-sessions, in formal discussion, in episcopal statements, not least in the wrestling of prayer. Some answers, we believe, have been worked out in both praxis and reflection, — at least in the discerning of imperatives for policy and action, "light enough to go by," for the immediate future.

Thus it would be incorrect, I believe, to say that we are entirely in the phase of unresolved problems. That would be, before the Lord, a posture of ingratitude. We do say our Magnificat every day, (and soon after Cardinal Sin's return to Manila in May, the President and he will break ground for the chapel of thanksgiving which will rise at the intersection of EDSA and Ortigas, where the Lord gave answer to our cries). The fact that there is in the Church in our country today an unprecedented vitality and energy, a measured optimism, and a newly-strengthened participation by the laity in the mainstream of our people's life, and in the mainstream of the Church's life and action as well, — all this seems to me to argue that the Holy Spirit has been with us to lead us, and that despite the pessimism of many "prophets of doom" in our midst, the Lord has given the Church a local leadership both hierarchical and lay which has actualized a Christian vision; that we are, please God, finding our way.
But it is by no means a time for complacency, or for the mere counting of past gains. The future we see holds still seemingly insurmountable problems. Desert and wilderness, as for the people of Israel, lie still ahead. In our political life the analogy of the Exodus, followed by forty years of wandering and of purification, of hesitations by some and rebellions by others, seems to President Aquino herself, and to so many others, a particularly appropriate parallel. In that showing, for the Church and for the service of theological reflection, (if the words of Pope John Paul II are correct, as I believe they are) . . . if man is indeed the way the Church must go, the way theology must go, then the years ahead, for the Church and her theologians, should be enough to daunt even the stoutest of spirits.

The challenge for the theological task is there, and even with our poor resources we must face it. As, increasingly, in the last two decades, we are called to this as by a vocation. For the kairos is upon us, and only we can give it response, because now "the time of the heirs is come." It is upon the young among us especially: the young leadership for example, which the Collegio Filippino on Via Aurelia nurtures today as a secret promise of a new springtime.

The theology which is at its beginnings demands much prayer and suffering still, demands a purity of heart from those who must construct it, a reliance on the Spirit, which only the poor of heart can have. It will demand a broader and deeper knowledge of the Great Tradition which is, in a true sense, the Church’s very life, and an authentic catholicity of mind and heart, a sense of communion with the local Asian churches which neighbor us, with the local churches of the old Christendom, and a firming of bonds with Peter, whose task it is to confirm his brethren in the one faith.

If, as we come to the end, I may be allowed a more personal note, I believe whatever Filipino theological reflection of enduring value will come, will come only when there shall be found those who engage in it, in the years ahead of us, who see it not merely as a profession highly-regarded enough, if little understood, or worse, see it as just an ill-paying job to be done in seminaries and colleges, but see it rather as a service, and a servanthood, worthy of the best of their gifts, a vocation to which they may commit themselves as Christian men and women; who shall tend it as a fire,
burning faithfully, tend it, why not, as a secret love in the heart, a service which shall in all its labor bear their love for the holy Church, as mother, to whom they have handed over the glad spending of their lives.

But I believe such men and women there are, and pray that there shall be more, in the time to come.

_Ardua adhuc restat via._ We trust the journey has begun, in faith. Over that journey, as in the lovely stained glass windows of the Collegio give us to understand, Our Lady of Peace and Happy Voyaging stands vigilant. And so we know that even in the restless morning, even with dark clouds moving over the rising seas, hope, like the Spirit, broods "over the bent world, with warm breast, and ah! bright wings."